

精靈王暗殺



精靈王
暗殺
の
剣
舞
使
い
の
ブレイドダンス

志瑞祐

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志瑞祐

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「……っ！」

ルビアの瞳が驚愕に見開かれる。
クレアは焰をかわそうともせず、
まっすぐにルビアの胸に飛び込んだのだ。

Rubbia Elstein
ルビア・エルステイン

「——姉様は、あたしにとつて、
ずっと大好きな姉様だもの」

Claire Rouge
クレア・ルージュ





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Prologue

Part 1

"Absolute Blade Arts - «Final Form, Last Strike· Dual»!"

There were the «Demon Slayer» in his right hand and the «Vorpal Sword» held in his left hand.

Crossing each other, the light and dark swords smashed Rubia Elstein's sword.

At that moment her crimson sword broke.

Her overflowing incandescence flames swept over immediately.

"...Don't tell me..."

It was a moment of stillness. Within the rampaging flames—

A sigh of despair leaked out from her mouth.

Or perhaps, she might be just simply gasping for oxygen.

In any case—

(—She wouldn't get another breath.)

The exploding flames were fanned by the wind from the swords and winded into eddies.

In that instant, Kamito rushed further in—

"Oooohhhhh!"

He let the crossed dual swords fly.

It was a slash of great speed released at super point-blank range.

The sword tip of «Vorpal Sword», glowing in the color of darkness, disappeared into her chest like it was being sucked in.

"...Ka...Ha—!"

Her ruby pupils widened like she was saying impossible.

Even as she was facing such a defeat, her appearance looked noble and beautiful.

Beautiful—he honestly thought.

—However, that strong feeling was also something of a moment.

"Sorry. I'll be taking back the title of the «Strongest Blade Dancer»."

While the demon sword in his left hand was stabbed in her chest—

Kamito brandished the «Demon Slayer» held in a reverse grip.

Part 2

Within the whirling flames and winds, fragments of «Laevateinn» fluttered down like sparks.

Having received that close blow, Rubia's body danced in midair and violently hit the ground.

"...Kk....Ah...!"

What Kamito let loose was a blow that did not materialize and delivered only mental damage to the opponent. There was no damage to her physical body.

Although she would have trouble breathing, much less speaking normally, Nevertheless—

(...Despite receiving that dual sword secret skill, she's still conscious.)

While stabilizing his wild breathing, Kamito muttered within his heart.

She probably had most of her power drained out by « Laevateinn».

Even so, having received that on one's body and staying conscious wasn't something ordinary.

When Kamito was entrusted the secret skill by Greyworth, he had completely fainted.

(So, this is the power of the «Sacred Maiden»...)

Areishia Idriss—«The Sacred Queen» that destroyed the «Demon King» thousands of years ago.

Rubia Elstein was the reincarnation that succeeded that power.

In other words, she was an existence that would have opposed Kamito, who succeeded the power of the «Demon King». That power transformed a sickly girl, who had never properly wielded a sword, into the strongest elementalist.

In any case—

Kamito was looking down at Rubia gasping in agony while he calmly put down his left and right swords.

The blade dance had completely concluded. Although she had the power of the «Sacred Maiden», having lost her elemental waffe meant that she no longer had the power to fight.

(...Well, it's the same for me too though—)

The moment that air of tension was gone, his vision grew hazy and intense sleepiness came assailing.

(...Like I thought, releasing two elemental waffe at the same time was a little too much...)

«Demon Slayer» & «Vorpal Sword». Both were extraordinary elemental waffe. Even if it was Kamito, wielding them both at the same time would certainly rob off all his divine power.

The «Spirit Seal» on both his hands lost their glow, and at that moment.

Strength suddenly escaped from his knees and he tumbled over his steps.

"...Kamito!"

Kamito was about to fall over as Claire in her ritual costume hugged him in a fluster.

"A-Are you alright?"

"...Yea. I just used a little too much divine power, that's all..."

While he was wrapped in the texture of something soft-feeling, he closed his eyelids.

His consciousness grew hazy. However, only his hands that held both his left and right swords wouldn't let go no matter what.

Even when Kamito fell as the «Demon King», Est had sworn to be together with him as the «Demon's Sword». Then—

(Restia...)

Since that day three years ago, she was the darkness spirit girl he had been pursuing all this time.

He felt like she would disappear again if he let his hand go—

He held the sword hilt with so much strength that his fist turned white.

"—Kamito-kun, relax. I'll apply the healing magic now."

Having dashed over, Fianna whispered that into his ear.

However, Kamito shook his head while he was in Claire's arms.

"...N-No...It'll be better if you don't touch me now."

"...Eh? W-Why?"

"I had once awakened as the «Demon King». What the Demon King's power is is the power of the reincarnated Ren Ashdoll—"

"In other words, it'll cause a backlash with my divine power that's cloaked in the holy attribute?"

"...Something...like that."

Kamito made a light nod.

To begin with, Kamito's body had a constitution that repelled against healing magic.

Because of that, Fianna had to take a roundabout method of making direct contact with her skin to send her divine power in and boosting Kamito's own healing ability, however—

If she did that in Kamito's current state of just awakening as the Demon King, there was no telling what kind of effect it would have.

Even if it was an unlikely thing, he couldn't let her face such dangers.

"But, at least get some non-magical emergency treatment—"

"I'm...fine. More importantly..."

Then, Kamito moved his line of sight somewhere in front after shaking his head.

At the heart of the spewing flames, Rubia was glaring at him while she raised a voice of anguish. It was remarkable that she still had not lost consciousness but that was just prolonging the agony on herself.

"Treat her first. Even if she was healed and recovered some strength, with her elemental waffe gone, she cannot be a threat."

"Kamito-kun..."

"...I...have...not lost yet ...!"

Rubia groaned from the depths of her throat.

With stern flames filled within those ruby pupils of hers, she staggered about as she stood up.

However—

"No, it is your loss, Rubia."

Kamito coldly denied.

"As I recall, you did say that the «Sacred Maiden» is the Anti-Unit of the «Demon King». That, in other words, means if my «Demon King» powers in me grow, your powers too would increase by my growth. Am I wrong?"

...She did not reply. The same ruby pupils as Claire's just glared at Kamito loathsomey.

"But your plans failed. I had shut out the power of the «Demon King» that was beginning to awaken. Which means—"

Taking a light breath, Kamito concluded.

"Your «Sacred Maiden» powers that made you the «Strongest Blade Dancer» also got shut out at the same time, right?"

"..."

He probably hit the mark. Her shoulders trembled weakly.

However—

"It...doesn't..."

"...What?"

"It doesn't...mean that the powers of the «Demon King» have completely vanished yet!—"

A blue flame was created in Rubia's right hand.

«Frost Blaze»—A heretic flame that was disconnected with the logic and laws of this world.

"...The two of you, get away from me!"

Kamito shouted and wielded both his right and left swords.

But, at that moment, a sharp numbing-like pain ran throughout his arms. It was the repercussion from releasing the secret skill of the Absolute Blade.

The nerves in his arms were paralyzed and Kamito became defenseless for a moment, when—

"Awaken once more now, Kazehaya Kamito. Otherwise—die."

She let loose the absolute-zero blue flame that would even freeze one's soul at Kamito.

"—Kamito!"

Claire stood up and jumped out before Kamito.

"Claire!?"

"O' true flames, carved in blood of ancient times, dwell in my hand and devour flames—"

As she quickly spun the words of an aria in the spirit language, crimson flames were clad over her hand.

Kamito widened his eyes. It wasn't Claire's specialty of spirit magic flames.

Those were heretic flames that would oppose Rubia's flames.

"That's the flames that returns all to nothing—«End of Vermillion»!"

Those dignified words trembled the atmosphere, and the crimson flames were released.

The raging flames of demise collided into the «Frost Blaze» Rubia released in midway—

"...!?"

An explosion that would normally happen from a collision between two spirit magic didn't happen.

The crimson flames Claire let loose burned out Rubia's flames in an instant.

Having greedily devoured the blue flames, Claire's flames stayed at that spot for a while—

And, eventually disappeared into nothing, without leaving any traces behind.

(This is Claire's «Flame-Burning Flames»...)

Kamito gulped. He had heard about it but this was the first time he saw it himself.

"...Tch, falling as the Darkness Queen has awakened your nature..."

Rubia muttered in astonishment.

"...Nee-sama, just stop it."

Then—

Claire promptly put her hand down and stepped forward.

"I will definitely not let Kamito be the «Demon King»."

The Elstein sisters confronted each other.

Within that tensed atmosphere, eyes of the same ruby pupils glared at each other.

It seemed like Rubia's eyes wavered for a mere instant but—

"...Don't...get in my way, Claire."

Leaking out from her lips were dispassionate words of farewell.

"I...have to save this world. That's the responsibility of those knowing the truth."

"The truth..."

Claire widened her eyes in surprise.

"Yes. I came here to hear the truth from your mouth, Nee-sama."

Having seemingly made her resolve, she nodded and, just like that, she walked on straight towards her sister.

"—The truth four years ago"

"Claire, it's dangerous—"

At the same time, Kamito gave a warning.

Absolute-zero flames again were created on Rubia's hand and they were blazing violently.

However, Claire did not falter. Keeping her arms defenselessly lowered, she drew closer towards her.

"...Tell me, Nee-sama. Why did you rebel against the «Elemental Lord» that day?"

"It has nothing to with you."

"There's no way it has nothing to with me. After all—"

"Shut it!"

"After all, Nee-sama—"

"... I said shut it!"

The absolute zero flames were released from Rubia's fingertip.

"Claire—!"

With a shout, Kamito frantically reached out his hands but he didn't make it.

Just as the surging blue flames were about swallow Claire whole.

"—Nee-sama, as far as I'm concerned, you have always been my beloved sister."

"...!"

Rubia's eyes of ruby pupils widened in shock.

Without even thinking of dodging the flames, Claire plunged right into Rubia's chest.

"...Why...didn't you avoid it?"

"I believed in you, Nee-sama, that you really wouldn't hit me."

Claire gently held Rubia's wounded body close to her.

"...!?"

"...Nee-sama, just stop all this..."

Her muffled voiced changed into a tearful sobbing in an instant.

Having lost her ability to move, Rubia stood still with a puzzled expression.

"—Looks like you've reached a conclusion, Rubia."

Kamito calmly told her.

"..."

After a short silence, she—

"...It would seem that way."

Looking up at the empty skies, she muttered with a sigh.

"I don't have much time remaining. Now that I've failed to awaken the «Demon King» here, the means to kill the «Elemental Lords» no longer exist—"

(...Time remaining?)

He got concerned with those words she casually said but—

There was something that he had to ask her first.

"Tell us. You said something like your goal was to remake this world into a world without spirits."

"..."

"You were once a «Queen» but why would you try to kill the «Elemental Lords»?"

"Nee-sama..."

Claire gently raised her crying face.

"Please, tell me the truth. The reason why you had to betray the «Elemental Lord»."

Rubia—

Her lips slightly trembled and she forced out a small sigh.

"You guys will never believe it. Even I couldn't believe it until I saw it with my own eyes. That such a thing exists in this world—"

"I believe you, Nee-sama. Regardless of what others say."

"Claire—"

Rubia's pupils wavered.

Claire looked straight back at those pupils of hers.

"..."

Rubia took another breath and her lips quivered slightly.

And—

"Four years ago, the reason I rebelled against the «Elemental Lord» was—"

She calmly opened her mouth.

—That the Elemental Lord had gone mad.

Chapter 1 - Calamity Queen

Part 1

—Four years ago, the «Divine Ritual Institute» 's supreme council selected Duke Elstein's eldest daughter, Rubia Elstein, to succeed the position of the Fire Elemental Lord's «Queen».

The previous Queen had already passed the age of twenty-five and her ability to commune with spirits was beginning to wane. Although her age still qualified for an incumbent elementalist, the «Fire Elemental Lord» desired to be served by young girls.

Back then, Rubia was just a young maiden who had just reached the age of fifteen. However, no one objected to her being chosen.

The prestigious House of Elstein had produced many «Fire Queens» in the past. Given that her talent was already flourishing and bearing fruit, it was only natural for Rubia to be selected.

The populace offered their blessings to the new «Queen». In turn, the young Rubia responded to the people's expectations and devoted all of her attention to serving the elemental lord.

Her kagura ritual dancing pleased the «Elemental Lord», bringing happiness and fortune to the people on the continent.

That was what she once believed firmly.

"—Back then, I was nothing but a foolish and ignorant little girl."

Rubia's voice trembled as she mocked herself.

"Offering my kagura to the «Elemental Lord» without the slightest doubt, I prayed for fire's blessings to bring peace to the continent. I firmly believed that it could bring happiness to the people—"

"Nee-sama, you were the object of our admiration."

Claire sobbed as she spoke.

"Nee-sama, you were praised as the continent's most gentle «Queen»... I-I also resolved myself to become a princess maiden like you when I grew up, Nee-sama."

"Rubia-sama was once the goal of all the princess maidens at the «Divine Ritual Institute». Ever since Rubia-sama was selected as the «Fire Queen», the power of flames was augmented and the populace was delivered from the hardships of cold winter—"

This time, it was Fianna's turn to speak.

Speaking of which, Rubia and Fianna had apparently been close friends during their time at the Divine Ritual Institute. Kamito suddenly recalled this fact.

"—Indeed, I once believed firmly. Those acts were for the people. The great «Elemental Lord» was a being who brought blessings to the people."

Rubia's prim and proper face was twisted in pain as she lamented in despair.

"—Until that particular day."

"...That particular day?"

Kamito frowned and asked.

Rubia bit her lip as though to suppress the rising anger in her heart.

"—Indeed, that particular day. It was roughly half a year after I became the «Fire Queen». A small town on the Empire's border was obliterated from the land."

"...!?"

Claire suddenly opened her eyes wide.

"Could it be the disaster of Dylus?"

"Yes. The town known as Dylus no longer exists."

"...That incident was not your fault, Nee-sama."

Claire shook her head in denial.

"...Back then, it was only thanks to your nonstop prayers, carried out with neither sleep nor rest, that the «Fire Elemental Lord»'s wrath was pacified—"

"Umm, could you pause right there?"

Kamito interrupted at this point.

"...Eh?"

"Say, what's the disaster of Dylus?"

Hearing Kamito's question, Claire's face was filled with disbelief.

"...Is it possible that you don't know about that incident?"

"Although there was a gag order at the time, it's a monumental incident that is known to virtually everyone in the Empire."

Fianna also cocked her head in puzzlement.

"Four years ago, I was still in the «Instructional School». The children who grew up there are not taught anything unrelated to their missions."

Even though Kamito had acquired basic knowledge from Restia's education, he was still completely ignorant of events that happened outside the facility at the time. Hence, he had never heard of the incident known as the disaster of Dylus.

"...Fair enough. Particularly after Nee-sama's betrayal, people seldom bring up that incident again. It's normal for Kamito not to know."

Claire shrugged and spoke quietly.

"The disaster of Dylus refers to the incident where the little town of Dylus on the border of the Ordesia Empire was obliterated from the land because they angered the «Fire Elemental Lord»."

"Obliterated?"

"Yes. Bathed in a rain of fire for three days and three nights, not a single trace remained."

Claire sorrowfully bowed her head.

"...Umm, and the reason?"

"The reason?"

"The reason for the elemental lord's anger. That's really unusual for an entire town to be destroyed."

Kamito's question prompted a layer of gloom to cloud Claire's face.

"The people of Dylus failed to prepare enough offerings—Supposedly."

"...Offerings?"

"Yes, due to the protracted drought that year, lands on the Empire's borders were unable to harvest enough grain to make offerings to the elemental lord. This ended up incurring his wrath."

"...! J-Just because of something like that—"

Kamito was dumbfounded.

Throughout the entirety of history, there had been multiple instances of monumental disasters caused by the «Elemental Lords».

Storms, severe earthquakes, river floods, volcanic eruptions—These monumental natural disasters, recorded in the continent's history, were essentially all caused by incurring the elemental lords' wrath.

However, who could have thought a city could be destroyed over such a thing—

"—Indeed. Precisely because of such a thing."

Rubia remarked sharply.

"Precisely because of such a thing, that town was turned into ash."

Her eyes burned with dim flames as she spat her words out in utter contempt.

"The rain of fire brought destruction to Dylus over three days and three nights. The flames incinerated people's homes completely. The surrounding soil was utterly ruined. The populace's lamentation was unheeded, their pleas rejected as well—"

"B-But!"

Claire raised her voice to object.

"At the time, Nee-sama, your prayers did manage to reach the «Elemental Lord». Everyone said that you pacified the disaster of Sidonia—"

"...Indeed. At the time, I saved that town."

Her voice trembled. Then the sound of gritted teeth was heard.

"The people of Dylus did not blame me. They even thanked me. They thanked me, the one who could do nothing about the town that was engulfed by flames. Everything went according to the «Elemental Lord»'s wishes. This was all their own fault for incurring the elemental lord's wrath!"

Crying out with erupting emotion, Rubia hammered a stone pillar with her fists.

(...The townspeople accepted their destruction without harboring any doubts.)

Kamito muttered in his heart.

In the human realm where everything borrowed the power of the spirits, the judgment of the «Elemental Lords», the rulers of Astral Zero, was absolute. People were not permitted to harbor the slightest doubt.

(However, back then, she...)

—Doubts formed in her mind.

As a «Queen» who served the elemental lord directly...

(Absolutely forbidden doubts were formed—)

Rubia spoke as though she were reading Kamito's thoughts.

"Indeed, that was the first impetus giving rise to my doubts."

"...The first."

"—Indeed. The disaster of Dylus was just the beginning."

Part 2

After that, the «Elemental Lord»'s judgment swept through various lands in the continent on several occasions.

Every time, Rubia would beg for mercy and prayed to appease his anger. But on each occasion, by the time her prayers finally went through, people had already lost all their possessions.

"I was powerless at the time. I could do nothing but lament my powerlessness...!"

Erupting from her throat were cries of sorrow.

The flames of hate burned intensely in her eyes of ruby.

"One day, the first time I voiced the doubt hidden in my heart was at the supreme council. I questioned the elemental lord's unreasonable instances of judgment. Next, I requested for a chance to have a direct audience with the elemental lord."

"An audience with the elemental lord!?"

Fianna cried out in surprise.

For her who was once a princess maiden at the «Divine Ritual Institute», these words carried special significance.

Even for the «Queen» who was chosen from among hundreds of princess maidens, wanting to meet the True Sanctuary's «Elemental Lords» was absolutely taboo.

Throughout the entirety of history, there did exist «Queens» who were admitted to a direct audience with the elemental lords, but they all died unnatural deaths without exception.

"Of course, I did not receive permission for a direct audience with the elemental lord. The supreme council imprisoned me for the crime of irreverence and that ended up causing more displeasure to the elemental lord."

Repeated tragedies. Prayers that absolutely failed to get through.

Carrying these doubts, lamenting her own powerlessness, even so, she continued to plead for mercy.

During those days, filled with despair—

The decisive event occurred, prompting her betrayal to become the «Calamity Queen».

"The elemental lord demanded a certain offering from me as the price to appease his anger."

"Offering..."

It was quite common for high-ranking spirits to demand offerings from humans.

The «Divine Ritual Institute»'s princess maidens made offerings of the dance performances they had learned. Elementalists offered their divine power to contracted spirits.

However, what exactly did the Fire Elemental Lord seek from Rubia—

"The elemental lord demanded from me..."

As though squeezing her voice out from the depths of her throat, Rubia spoke:

"—Elstein's True Flame."

"...!?"

Everyone's face froze.

Elstein's True Flame.

These words meant—

"—Is it possible that it meant using Claire as an offering?"

"..."

Rubia's silence gave the answer.

Elstein's True Flame. These words meant the House of Elstein's bloodline.

Carried by the two sisters, the heretical flames that transcended the world's laws and principles.

"...No... way..."

Claire murmured in shock.

"The «Elemental Lord» wanted my life?"

"This is impossible to believe, Rubia-sama."

Fianna instantly rejected it.

(...Indeed, it was inconceivable for an «Elemental Lord» to demand a living person's life as a sacrifice.)

Spirits who demanded live sacrifices were rare indeed. This was fact.

However, those spirits that ruled over people through fear were successively defeated by human heroes over the generations.

It was possible for an evil spirit of the earth, but it was completely inconceivable for an «Elemental Lord» to demand this kind of offering as one of Astral Zero's exalted rulers.

Nevertheless—

"Whether you believe it or not, that is the truth."

Dim flames in her eyes, Rubia spoke.

"At first, I could not believe it either. I thought it was a test of loyalty for me, the one who had doubted the «Elemental Lord»'s judgment. I regretted my suspicions and pleaded for absolution. I kept offering kagura dancing and prayers so that the demand for sacrifice would be withdrawn. Every night, until I fell unconscious to the ground, I kept at it nonstop, nonstop, nonstop..."

However, those prayers were completely in vain.

"I pleaded to use my own life as a sacrifice. My body also carried Elstein's True Flame. I hoped my younger sister's life could be spared in exchange for mine."

"Nee-sama..."

The answer was no.

What the elemental lord sought was not Rubia's flame but the flame of her sister, Claire.

Next, the elemental lord's flames of wrath were stoked by the «Queen»'s persistent pleas for mercy.

The flames of his wrath were directed towards the people of Ordesia. The elemental lord issued a decree that threatened to rain down destruction upon the imperial capital equivalent to Dylus' plight if the sacrifice was not offered.

"How... could..."

"Even for an «Elemental Lord», such an atrocity cannot possibly be accepted!"

Fianna objected sharply.

"What did the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s supreme council say?"

"The elders completely ignored my appeals. Despite their doubts about the disastrous decree, they simply kept repeating that the «Elemental Lord»'s will is absolute."

Rubia gritted her teeth hard and shook her head.

"I despaired. Towards the Divine Ritual Institute, the elemental lord, as well as myself, powerless to resist—"

Then the night before the imperial capital was about to turn into a burning inferno...

She made her decision.

Part 3

At daybreak as judgment loomed over the imperial capital.

Rubia broke the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s taboo and entered the deepest part of the shrine.

This was a place where even «Queens» were absolutely forbidden.

Astral Zero's «True Sanctuary».

She went before the guardian spirit that protected the True Sanctuary.

It probably had not expected a «Queen» would break the taboo. Suffering a surprise attack, the guardian spirit was devoured and destroyed by the mystical flames of absolute zero before it noticed Rubia's intentions.

The one hindering her from gaining an audience with the «Elemental Lord» no longer existed.

In the first place, only «Queens» were permitted to step foot in the shrine. Stationed outside the shrine, the spirit knights could not notice what happened inside.

Passing through the endless corridor leading to the True Sanctuary, Rubia reached the deepest room.

Then she opened the towering final gates.

Following the steps that led high above, she reached the top level.

She arrived at a throne that was covered by a massive curtain.

"—I saw that."

Trembling—

Her entire body shuddered from terror.

This girl who was the «Strongest Blade Dancer»'s imposter...

Rather than anger, she was trembling from pure terror.

Seeing her pale expression, the trio involuntarily swallowed a mouthful of air.

"What was it—"

Kamito was the first to speak.

"At the True Sanctuary where the «Elemental Lords» reside, what did you see?"

Rubia—

The color of fear clearly surfaced in her eyes of ruby.

"—You must have witnessed the same sight as I did. Three years ago."

"...!"

Kamito recalled the feeling that felt as though a sharp blade had stabbed into his heart.

Cold sweat broke out from his forehead and dripped on the ground.

"Kamito and Nee-sama both saw the same thing?"

Claire frowned with surprise—

She instantly understood.

"...Th-That's right. You were the previous «Blade Dance»'s—"

(...Come to think of it, Claire already knows.)

Turning his gaze away, slightly embarrassed, Kamito sighed in his heart.

Claire's gaze towards Kamito did not show any signs of reprimand. Although Kamito still had some doubts, he swept them aside for now—

(...I saw the «Elemental Lords» three years ago?)

Having an audience with the «Elemental Lords» was an absolute taboo even for a «Queen».

However, there was one and only one exception.

—Namely, the winner of the «Blade Dance».

The elementalist who obtained victory throughout the brutal blade dances was rewarded with the chance to personally voice their «Wish» in front of the «Elemental Lords» ruling from the True Sanctuary.

(...!)

Throb—Instantly, Kamito's brain felt a pang of intense pain.

Whenever he tried to recall what had happened back then, his thoughts entered a hazy state.

"...That day, I probably saw the same thing."

Recovering barely enough to speak, Kamito shook his head lightly.

"But I have no memories of that time at all."

That which existed in the deepest part of the True Sanctuary.

The only image he could recall was the darkness that devoured Restia.

Kamito's gaze was drawn to the demon sword of darkness gripped in his left hand.

(Restia, you should know, right?)

The true identity of that which had caused the «Calamity Queen» to despair.

"That day, what I saw was—"

Just as Rubia was about to speak...

Raging flames suddenly poured out from thin air.

"...What!?"

Kamito swiftly readied his dual swords—

Next, he suddenly turned his gaze towards Rubia.

"...Ah, guh...!"

Rubia was crouching on the floor, groaning in pain.

Many beads of sweat appeared on her forehead while red droplets of blood dripped from her arms.

"N-Nee-sama, what's going on!?"

The first to notice Rubia's unusual symptoms, Claire held her hand.

"So hot!"

As soon as she touched the dripping blood, Claire screamed softly.

The blood flowing from her body was boiling like seething lava.

"What... is this... Nee-sama, what on earth, happened...?"

Rolling up Rubia's sleeve, Claire could not help but hold her breath.

Covering her arm was an ominous seal that resembled a snake.

(That's a cursed armament seal...!)

"...Looks like the final moment has arrived."

Losing all color of blood from her face, Rubia smiled in a dreamlike manner.

"The final... Nee-sama, what on earth... is going on...?"

"—The flames of purgatory are demanding my soul."

Suddenly, the crimson flames that had manifested out of the air bared their fangs towards Rubia.

Chapter 2 - Dance of the Dual Swords

Part 1

"...!"

Almost reflexively—

Kamito swung the dual swords he was wielding.

Giving off dazzling brilliance, the sword of steel—«Terminus Est»—deflected the incoming flames. Held in a reverse grip, the demon sword was swung towards the flames attacking from the opposite direction.

"Claire!"

Before Kamito cried out, Claire had already summoned «Flametongue».

Sweeping her surroundings in a circular manner, she produced an intensely burning wall of fire.

"What's going on? Why did your flames attack you?"

Kamito turned his gaze towards Rubia behind him.

Rubia showed an expression of enduring intense pain.

"Those are not my own flames..."

"What?"

"That type of flame... was acquired... using this life as the price..."

"Kamito, it's coming!"

Clare yelled out.

The roaring flames penetrated her wall of fire and attacked the immobile Rubia.

Kamito clicked his tongue and blocked the flames by crossing his dual swords.

(...The flames have strengthened?)

Judging from the heat scorching his skin, Kamito sensed through instinct.

"...Take this, turn into charcoal!"

Gnawing at the dual swords persistently, the flames were incinerated by Claire's «Flame-Burning Flames».

Where the flames vanished, a sharp noise resembling glass shattering could be heard.

Staring in shock at what had shattered—Kamito's eyes instantly widened.

It was a transparent crimson crystal—a fragment of the «Godslaying flames».

"...What!? «Laevateinn» should be smashed already—"

"What you smashed was my elemental waffe. The spirit itself was not... destroyed."

Rubia panted as she spoke.

The cursed armament seals on her arms were glowing ominously while the color of blood seeped through her military uniform.

"«Laevateinn» is a spirit weapon that was defeated by the «Five Great Elemental Lords» during the past Spirit War and sealed away. Hence, it hates the «Elemental Lords» and lent its power to me due to our shared goals. However—"

Rubia coughed violently. The crimson and bloody froth began to spread on the ground.

"Originally, it was not a spirit that humans could form a contract with. As the price for a contract incommensurate with oneself, that spirit demanded—My life."

"...H-How could that be...!?"

Claire cried out sorrowfully—

"A contract whose price is one's life cannot be sustained for years—"

But in the middle of speaking, Claire suddenly realized something and held her breath.

"Those excessive cursed armament seals. Are they for sustaining the impossible contract?"

Kamito asked calmly.

"..."

Rubia did not answer. Biting her lip, she was enduring the intense pain tormenting her entire body.

(...Through the Theocracy, she had contacted «Murders».)

An organization formed by merchants of death, «Murders» was involved in the transplantation of illegal cursed armament seals. Rubia had probably transplanted cursed armament seals on her body through them.

Using countless fake contracts, piling multiple layers on top of the original contract, the strongest flame spirit was restrained.

However, this kind of method could not last indefinitely. Even for a «Queen» possessing a princess maiden's disposition of the highest rank, the burden on the body would eventually reach a limit.

"So you intended to die from the very start?"

"Had you awakened as the «Demon King» and accepted the will of the Darkness Elemental Lord «Ren Ashdoll» who is dominated by hatred, you would have gone to murder the «Elemental Lords»... In that event, my death would have been worthwhile."

While coughing blood, Rubia spoke indifferently.

Kamito stared at her.

"What a willful plan that was."

"...Idealism alone cannot save anything. That was what I truly experienced back when I was still a «Queen». Even if great sacrifices must be made, this is the only way to save the world."

"No. That's not what I'm talking about."

Kamito shook his head.

"...What...?"

"Did it ever cross your mind? If you died, there are people who will be heartbroken."

"..."

Crimson flames roared. The noise sounded as though it came from underground and caused Kamito's nerves to tense all over his body.

"Kamito..."

"Yeah—"

Hearing Claire's worried voice, Kamito nodded.

"That must be—the main body of the «Godslaying Flames»."

Cold sweat flowed down his forehead.

Over there was—

A «Hand» hovering in midair.

Surrounded by roaring flames, a giant hand.

Madly, it roamed the air as though in search of something.

"It's not really the main body. That's just one part of the «Godslaying Flames»."

"...Just one part?"

Kamito groaned in disbelief.

An elemental waffe was simply a fraction of a powerful spirit's strength, merely drawn out through the contract.

In other words, the «Laevateinn» that Rubia had wielded was merely making use of a minor fraction of the strongest flame spirit's power.

However, the hand extending out from thin air—

(...Archdemon class, at the very least probably.)

Just an arm already produced such astounding heat. Once the main body manifested, surely the entire space itself would be destroyed.

"—Claire."

At this moment, Rubia forced out a weak voice.

"Nee-sama?"

"You can still make it. Leave this place."

"...I-I don't want that! ...I must fight it."

"Useless. It's not a being that humans can defeat."

Rubia displayed a grim gaze and shook her head.

Watching the arm of flame slowly crawling out of the air—

"What it seeks is the contract's price. Once I offer my life, it will probably return to where it came from. I have lost—This is merely accepting my comeuppance."

She smiled as though giving up.

"O-Oh right! All we need to do is break Nee-sama's magic stone and she'll be forcibly transferred to «Ragna Ys»."

"This thing is summoned using the spirit seal carved in my heart that serves as the medium. It will surely cause destruction if brought over to «Ragna Ys»>"

"...!"

Claire bit her lip hard.

She could not save her precious elder sister. She did not have the power to rescue her.

At this moment—

"Don't give up."

A hand touched Claire on the shoulder.

It was Kamito. Smiling fearlessly, he stared at the arm of flame floating in midair.

"Kamito..."

"Rubia, the same goes for you. It's too early to despair."

Kamito looked back, causing Rubia to stare in surprise.

"Guarding my life... What meaning is there...?"

"...Who knows."

Kamito shrugged casually and readied his dual swords again.

(...Only that I don't want to see sorrow on your sister's face again.)

If anything, his reason was that simple. But Kamito had no obligation to tell her that.

Furthermore, it was too embarrassing to say out loud in front of Claire, the person in question.

"Also, I still have stuff to ask you."

"Then you'll have to survive this first. It's currently just an arm right now, but once the true body appears, it will not be satisfied with just me as the sacrifice."

"—Well then, I'll just have to defeat it."

"...Foolish. It would be okay if your power as the «Demon King» was awakened, but in your current state, all covered in wounds, you have no such ability—"

"It's not like there's no chance for victory at all. Its main body hasn't manifested yet, right?"

Turning his gaze away from Rubia behind him, Kamito took a step forward.

(...Yes, there's still a chance for victory.)

Telling himself that, he took another step forward.

The giant arm was surrounded with flames.

It was slowly entering from that tear in space.

However, it was just an arm.

For the true body to manifest, that tear was far too narrow.

The cursed armament seals that had been transplanted onto Rubia's body were still restraining the contract.

(If it's before the true body manifests, there's a possibility that—)

Gazing at the arm of wild flames, Kamito infused divine power into his dual swords.

This «Lost Cathedral» was a large-scale magic device for absorbing divine power from the abandoned city's leylines. Simply standing in this space was enough to replenish divine power.

(—The problem lay in the body's condition.)

The burden of unleashing the dual sword secret technique had caused all his muscles to scream in pain.

...Sizzle... Sizzle sizzle... Sizzle sizzle sizzle sizzle... Sizzle...!

Accompanied by annoying noises, the arm of flame crawled out all at once.

(—No time to think, huh?)

«Laevateinn»—the spirit weapon sealed in the sanctuary—was also the strongest flame spirit.

Were it to manifest completely, things would be over.

Kamito must take this opportunity while it was still incomplete to stuff it back where it came from.

However, even after defeating it, so long as the spirit contract remained, this would amount to nothing but stalling for time. No matter how many more attempts it would take, it was probably still going to keep demanding Rubia's life.

However, Kamito had an idea.

Although he did not know if it would work—

No matter what, it would be meaningless unless the issue was resolved right now.

The flame spirit opened its palm.

"Kamito, it's coming!"

The warning came from Claire.

A heat wave shook the air in the next instant.

A giant fireball was being released from the hand's fingertips—!

An overwhelming mass of heat was attacking, dragging a crimson tail behind it.

This was Claire's prided specialty, «Fireball» magic, except the difference in power was as far apart as heaven and earth.

An explosion occurred. Before Kamito's eyes, the fireball exploded into roaring flames.

The sound of the explosion and the swirling center of the heatwave—

"Such power..."

Stabbing her silver rapier into the ground, Fianna wiped sweat off her brow as she grumbled.

Kamito's group was surrounded by a radiant shield of light.

This was «Save the Queen»—the elemental waffe that erected a sturdy barrier around its user.

Due to returning Scarlet's contract back to Claire, Fianna's circuits reconnected, allowing her to use her knight spirit again.

"Fianna, can I entrust Rubia's protection to you?"

"Yes. But it can't be sustained for long."

Fianna replied in an urgent voice.

Although her elemental waffe barely managed to defend against the current attack—

Once the original power of the «Godslaying Flames» manifested, even «Save the Queen» would probably be smashed easily.

"Yeah. Before it comes out—I will settle things!"

Kamito nodded and leapt from the ground, wielding both swords in his hands.

Concentrating his awareness in his hands, Kamito yelled out in his heart.

(Both of you, lend me your power!)

—Yes. I am your sword, your wish is my command.

—I am yours, Kamito. The sword spirit's power is not needed.

—I don't need the darkness spirit's power either.

Sparks flew between the two contracted spirits.

(Come on, stop arguing inside my mind—)

The giant arm swung through the air. Infusing his dual swords with divine power, Kamito charged forward all at once.

The flames of purgatory approached, incinerating a wide area. It was impossible to dodge at this range.

However, there was nothing to fear. If those were ordinary flames—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Fourth Form—Blaze Slash!"

This technique of the Absolute Blade absorbed flames and imbued elemental waffen with the flame attribute.

The flames were sliced apart. Shining with silver-white brilliance, «Terminus Est»'s blade became incandescent.

Hot wind was roasting Kamito's face. Unconcerned, Kamito charged.

"You, O true darkness—Pierce!"

Sleek and pitch-black, the blade of darkness flashed with ominous red light.

With godlike speed, Kamito attacked the flame-spewing arm.

The blade's tip pierced the flame spirit. He could feel a definite hit from the sensation.

However—

"...!?"

The demon sword of darkness was engulfed in flames.

Despite having vanquished numerous spirits in the past, a strike from the «Vorpal Sword» failed to inflict decisive damage to «Laevateinn».

Be that as it may, Kamito's attack was not completely ineffective.

Due to the damage suffered, it finally recognized Kamito as an enemy rather than a target to be devoured.

Fingers of flame grabbed the «Vorpal Sword»'s blade, dragging it into midair.

"...!"

Urgently, Kamito swung his right hand's «Demon Slayer».

The fingers of flame were severed and sent flying. Kamito instantly withdrew the demon sword of darkness and jumped back.

The arm of flame chased in pursuit. Although one could not tell since it was just an arm, the spirit was probably angered.

(...Oh well, that's only natural. After all, it suffered a counterattack from the contract's sacrifices.)

Kamito instantly shifted his gaze over towards Rubia's side.

Fianna had erected «Save the Queen»'s barrier. Inside there, Rubia was crouching while looking towards him.

—With an expression of total incomprehension.

(I have no idea what you saw four years ago in the True Sanctuary—)

Crossing the two swords to deflect the descending fist, Kamito pulled back and distanced himself.

(But you despaired far too quickly, Rubia Elstein.)

Kamito's mutterings carried a hint of self-mockery.

He himself had plunged into deep despair in the past as well.

Three years ago, when he lost Restia.

(—After that, I lived as though I were a hollow shell.)

However, he finally freed himself from despair, all thanks to—

The severed fingers of the flame spirit regenerated. Kamito dodged the swinging fist by a hair's breadth.

—No good, Kamito!

His mind suddenly rang with Restia's warning.

Suddenly, the tear in space was forced apart—

—Sizzle... Sizzle sizzle sizzle sizzle sizzle...!

The flame spirit's arm extended as a result.

(...Crap—)

Surpassing Kamito's expectations, the giant arm drew near before his eyes.

As much as he tried to defend against the flames with his two swords, however—

(...I'm gonna be crushed to death!?)

He could not block the «Godslaying Flames»' overwhelming power.

Together with the two swords, Kamito was being crushed against the ground.

"Guh, ah...!"

His entire body was sinking into the stone floor. The heat wave charred his hair and slowly stole oxygen from his lungs. Without the protection from his elemental waffen, his body probably would have been vaporized just now—

At this moment—

"Kamito!"

Slicing through wind, the flaming whip entangled the «Godslaying Flames»' arm.

The pressure disappeared for an instant. Kamito did not miss this opening. Using the «Demon Slayer» as a shield and sliding the «Vorpal Sword» that crossed it, he flipped to the side and escaped.

The giant arm crashed down. The wind of the explosion blew Kamito away.

Kamito lost balance but Flametongue grabbed his leg and swiftly pulled him to the ground.

"...Thanks a lot, Claire."

"Seriously, stop going at it recklessly alone."

"Sorry..."

Kamito shrugged and smiled wryly.

Indeed, the reason that Kamito was able to break free from despair was all thanks to—

Claire and the teammates he met at the Academy.

Even for Kamito who was once known as the «Strongest Blade Dancer», he could not have come this far by his own efforts alone.

(...You should rely on others more.)

However, in Rubia's despair, she sought capable pawns instead of comrades.

«Team Inferno»—a group of outstanding users of extraordinary powers.

Suddenly—

"Kamito, you should retreat from the line of fire for now."

"Uh?"

"Your divine power is about to deplete."

"...!"

Kamito only noticed from the reminder.

Held in his respective hands, the two swords were flashing unsteadily.

Simultaneously releasing two elemental waffen of the highest rank was consuming more divine power than he imagined.

Even the divine power supplied by the «Lost Cathedral» could not keep up with the rate of consumption.

—Don't... worry... Kami.. to...!

—Still... can... do it...!

Est and Restia's voices sounded out in his mind simultaneously.

However, their voices were much less clear than before.

Soon after, the spirit seals on his hands stopped glowing and he could no longer hear their voices.

"...Tsk, this is bad..."

"I'll buy us time. Kamito, you focus on recovering."

"But you—"

Kamito hesitated.

The opponent was the highest ranking flame spirit. Claire alone—

"Fianna, please—"

"Yeah."

"...?"

Unnoticed by Kamito, she had sneaked up on him—

The voice came from behind.

Feeling a sudden tug on his collar, Kamito found himself pulled into the barrier of light.

"Fianna, let go—!"

"No."

Fianna scolded him.

"Leave things to Claire for now. In your current state of divine power depletion, you are unable to inflict critical damage on «Laevateinn»."

"...!"

Sweeping her hand aside was not hard.

But Kamito did not do that because he had no choice but to admit that she was right.

Kamito put down his hands that were wielding the two swords.

"This tower is a device for gathering divine power. If you concentrate, you can recover divine power rapidly."

"...True, but it's not like it can be done in a matter of seconds."

Both of Kamito's elemental waffen consumed vast amounts of divine power.

Recovery would take a few minutes at least... It was hard to imagine Claire buying that much time.

"...I will protect Nee-sama!"

Her hair fluttered and floated like burning flames—

Claire jumped.

The giant arm extending in midair was severed by her crimson slash.

"No way—"

Kamito stared wide-eyed in surprise.

According to the rules of Astral Zero, flames cutting other flames was an impossible phenomenon.

Claire had applied the power of her «Flame-burning Flames» to her elemental waffe.

Crimson flames were cleaved in all directions as Flametongue sliced «Laevateinn» apart.

Having awakened as the «Darkness Queen», Claire now seemed able to control those flames.

(However—)

«Laevateinn»'s arm quickly regenerated and formed even stronger flames to attack Claire.

Signs of fatigue began to show on Claire's face.

(...I knew it. Ordinary attacks don't work.)

While suppressing his anxiety, Kamito groaned in his mind.

He closed his eyes and focused his mind to gather divine power in the two swords in his hands.

He could feel the divine power he obtained from the leylines, circulating in his body.

However, the amount was too little.

Having awakened as the «Demon King» at one point, Kamito's body even deflected «Save the Queen»'s effects that granted every type of protection.

His current level of divine power could not activate elemental waffen of the highest class.

(Hurry... Hurry...!)

At this moment—

"Why—"

Kamito heard a weak voice.

"Why... haven't you all despaired?"

Rubia gazed intently at Kamito with a bloodless expression.

"..."

Just as Kamito was lost at how to answer—

"It's enough for me to be the only sacrifice. There is still a chance to escape—"

She took out a certain object from her bloodstained military uniform.

Displaying metallic luster, held in her hand was—

A small pendant on a chain.

"That's—"

...Kamito had some recollection.

Two months or so earlier.

On that day when Kamito transferred into the Academy, Claire had shown such an object.

Decorated with a lion emblem, it was the House of Elstein's pendant.

She handed that item to Kamito's hands.

"...What do you intend?"

"I wish—to give it to my sister."

Kamito shrugged and spoke:

"Spare me the last words. If you die, Claire will be sad. I don't want to see her making that kind of face ever again."

"..."

"—Listen, Rubia, I will protect you even if it means putting my life on the line."

Hearing Kamito's firm resolve, she—

Bit her cherry lips hard.

"—You're seriously... a fool."

Then she touched Kamito's arm lightly.

Instantly...

(...W-What!?)

Scorching flames swirled around Kamito's entire body.

So hot. His heart was burning like a furnace and his blood was boiling.

"...What did you... do to me...?"

"«Eternal Blood of the Phoenix»—Recovery magic. Only high-ranking princess maidens are qualified to chant it."

"Recovery magic...?"



Kamito was astonished.

"It shouldn't work on me—"

"Kamito-kun, «Eternal Blood» is not holy-attribute spirit magic."

Fianna shook her head.

"This is the only existing fire magic under the healing system."

"Fire-attribute healing magic..."

Scorching flames were flowing over from Rubia's fingertips.

"This won't cause any problems... will it?"

Kamito recalled what happened when Rubia used seal magic earlier.

However, the intense pain from that time was absent—

"No it won't. This is legitimate «Queen» magic. However, unlike usual healing magic, it only imitates those properties."

"...You are the «Demon King»'s successor. The only being who can destroy the «Elemental Lords». You cannot die... here..."

Rubia's fingers left Kamito's arm.

"...I entrust my sister to you."

After murmuring softly in a feeble voice—

With that, her knees collapsed and she fell to the floor.

"...Yeah. Leave it to me."

Kamito nodded calmly.

The flames of purgatory were rampaging in his body. Almost out of control, the divine power was forcibly suppressed by Kamito.

As soon as he poured divine power into his hands, the dual swords shone with brilliance once more.

(So this is the divine power from the continent's strongest «Queen»...!)

Powerful light, strong enough to bring pain to his eyes, caused Kamito to hold his breath.

No ordinary elementalist could compare to this. The difference in the amount of divine power was as far apart as heaven and earth.

"Kamito-kun, the barrier won't last much longer!"

As Fianna screamed, the silver rapier embedded in the ground vanished.

Once «Save the Queen»'s protection was released, a wave of heat instantly rushed over all at once.

"...Kamito, hurry...!"

Claire cried out. Kamito took a leap and—

"Absolute Blade Arts, First Form—Purple Lightning!"

He sliced apart the flames that were attacking Claire.

"Claire, it's okay now. Step back."

"...Got it."

Instantly trading positions, Claire retreated to the back.

Sliced into two, the burning arm of flames regenerated immediately and attacked Kamito.

As expected, against the strongest flame spirit that possessed infinite reserves of divine power, anything less than a full-powered attack would be useless.

(There's no choice but to use overwhelming power to destroy the «Gate» in the air outright—)

Just at this moment...

—... Kamito, can you hear me...?

A voice was heard in his mind.

(...Restia?)

While deflecting the oncoming flames, Kamito asked.

—Under the current conditions, unleashing a bold move would be foolhardy.

Kamito understood her point. Even with the divine power Rubia entrusted to him, this body, covered in injuries, could hardly perform the strongest sword technique.

But in order to take out «Laevateinn», there was no choice but to use the anti-spirit Absolute Blade Arts.

(...But I can only gamble on that—)

—Imagine. The form of the sword that matches you.

(...Uh?)

—There's no need to be bound by the form used three years ago, right?

Kamito realized only after it was pointed out to him.

(—Right!)

Currently, both of Kamito's elemental waffen were two-handed greatswords.

Although they were highly destructive in single strikes, the strain on the body was equally intense.

In that case—

—You don't mind either, Miss Sacred Sword, do you?

—I am Kamito's sword, Kamito's wish is my command.

Faced with Restia's slightly taunting tone of voice, Est's blade responded with dazzling radiance.

(Dual swords huh...)

Kamito imagined in his mind the assassination swords that were familiar to him in the past.

As he poured divine power into the seals on his hands—

That weight, shape and balance awakened in his memory.

(...That's it!)

The instant the image became clear...

The two swords turned into particles of light and transformed.

From large-sized greatswords to small one-handed swords—

(—This will work!)

Holding the white and black swords in reverse grips, Kamito jumped up.

His body felt very light as though he could not feel the weight of the two swords in his hands.

While slicing apart the roaring flames, he swiftly crossed the great hall.

«Laevateinn»'s palm released a rain of fireballs.

Scarlet flames instantly buried his view and were about to swallow Kamito.

However, Kamito moved even faster. Flying among the flames, he then—

"Dual sword technique—«Orochi»!"

An endless stream of black and white slashes struck down the fireballs one after another.

This was an assassination technique from the «Instructional School»—an unorthodox sword skill that Greyworth had banned him from using.

—You're going to get scolded by the witch again, Kamito.

"Who cares about her right now—"

Retorting to Restia's jest, Kamito charged.

«Laevateinn» produced fireballs again—

"I'm not going to let you succeed!"

Before that, Kamito had already swept the black demon blade—the «Vorpal Sword»—horizontally.

Jet-black lightning erupted from the dark and shiny blade.

—«Vorpal Blast». This sword skill had defeated numerous elementalists at the «Blade Dance» three years ago.

The fireballs exploded inside «Laevateinn»'s hand. The impact shook the great hall.

"Ohhhhhh!"

Flying past the scattering debris, Kamito instantly closed in. Kicking the ground, he leapt into the air.

(This will decide the victor—!)

Pouring the maximum amount of divine power to the two swords, he swung them both down at the same time—

Suddenly, the tear in space expanded.

(...!?)

Out crawled another arm.

(...Crap, I can't dodge this!)

Kamito instantly made his decision and overlapped his swords to make a cross.

(—Please hold out!)

Compared to the two-handed greatswords, the durability of one-handers were much lower. Even for the legendary demon sword and sacred sword, whether they could withstand the strongest flame spirit's power was still unknown—

(If they yield now, I'm gonna turn into charcoal—)

At this moment, the wall of flame covering the great hall suddenly split apart.

"—"Fahrengart style of the spear, Flash Gale!"

Penetrating the wall of fire, enveloped in a gale, the magic spear charged in between the Kamito and the arm of flame.

The one who had thrown the spear was—

(—Ellis!)

Ponytail flying in the wind, the maiden knight entered Kamito's view while he was in midair.

Stabbed into the ground, the magic spear produced a whirlwind, causing Kamito's body to rise.

His teammate had created an opening for him.

Despite its brevity, it was enough.

Readyng his two swords in the air, Kamito infused the swords with the divine power that was rampaging in his body.

Then—

"Absolute Blade Arts, Destructive Form—Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance - Thirty-six Consecutive Strikes!"

Countless shining slashes ripped «Laevateinn» apart together with the «Gate» in the air.

Part 2

"Ha, hahaha! How amusing, you really are quite interesting, Kazehaya Kamito!"

On the «Lost Cathedral»'s top level, the shrine where Claire had been imprisoned earlier—

The Theocracy's witch gazed into the distant scene displayed in the crystal ball and laughed on her own.

"However, Rubia Elstein turned out to be far too naive. This is the result of injecting half-baked emotions. Were I in her place, I would surely destroy Claire Rouge's mind completely, then proceed to create the «Darkness Queen» of my liking—"

Her lips twisted sardonically.

"Thanks to that, the plan failed... But no matter. Depending on circumstances, this might turn out to be even more interesting, kukuku..."

Serpentine eyes were staring at the demon sword of darkness shown in the crystal.

The will of the Darkness Elemental Lord, Ren Ashdoll, guided the «Demon King»'s awakening.

However, the darkness spirit currently seemed to have changed in nature under some sort of influence.

That which wore the guise of Sjora Kahn grinned fearlessly.

"Victory shall be yielded to you here, Kazehaya Kamito. Since that little lady failed, I am not obliged to entertain this any further."

She took out the «Magic Stone» carrying «Team Inferno»'s crest from her bosom.

Applying slight force with her fingers, the «Magic Stone» cracked and quickly shattered.

Accompanying the «Magic Stone»'s destruction, «Transfer» magic immediately activated. Sjora Kahn's body turned into particles of light and gradually disappeared into the air—

"Kuku, let the war begin. A great war unprecedented in the human realm, surpassing the Demon Lord War and the Ranbal War in the past!"

Part 3

"—Ohhhhhhhhh!"

The final sword strike slashed through the air.

The rampaging arm of flame vanished without trace along with the tear in space.

The sea of flame covering the floor disappeared at the same time. Instantly, silence dominated the scene.

Maintaining his dual wielding stance, Kamito landed on the ground.

Then following his momentum, he collapsed on his knees.

"...Kamito!" "Kamito-kun!"

Claire and Fianna frantically hurried over.

Appearing over at the door, Ellis and Rinslet also rushed over.

"Kamito, are you okay!?" "Kamito-san!"

"...Ouch..."

Groaning while he looked up, Kamito's view was dominated by the four faces that were watching him worriedly.

They seem to be crying out something but he could not hear very clearly. Perhaps his hearing was numbed.

"...Ellis... Rinslet... Thank goodness you're both safe and sound..."

Not even able to stand up, Kamito spoke softly.

Perhaps the nerves in his arms were damaged, he could not even lift a finger.

This was the backlash from using spirit-vanquishing Absolute Blade Arts.

"...Has Sjora Kahn... been defeated?"

Kamito tried to move his lips and asked the two girls.

"No—"

Hearing him, Ellis shook her head in chagrin.

"The Theocracy's witch escaped... Or rather, she let us go. If Leonora-dono had not hurried over to offer her assistance, we would have lost to that demon spirit."

"...Leonora made it in time huh."

During the fight in the lower levels, Kamito had not taken away Leonora's «Magic Stone». Instead, he asked her to assist Ellis and Rinslet who were fighting Sjora Kahn.

She had fulfilled her promise with Kamito, her opponent.

"...Uh, Leonora?"

Collapsed on the ground, Kamito looked around him.

There were no signs of the demon dragon user.

"...She forfeited the final round."

"Forfeited?"

"Yes. Leonora-dono left a message for you."

Ellis nodded and took out a «Magic Stone» from her bosom.

"I have already blade danced with Kamito with my full power and lost. Obsessing over victory and refusing to admit defeat would be a taint to that supreme blade dance—That was what she said."

"...I see."

Exiting the stage like that really suited her style.

Having blade danced with her with everything he had, Kamito felt pride from the bottom of his heart.

"...Claire is fine too."

"...Yeah. Umm... Thank you, everyone."

"H-Helping a teammate is only natural."

"It somehow feels weird to hear honest thanks from you."

"Does untying your hair change your personality?"

"...S-So annoying. What the heck."

Claire pouted with displeasure.

At her feet, Scarlet wagged her tail happily.

"...Anyway, it's great that everyone is safe and sound—Cough, ah..."

Suddenly, Kamito's entire body was filled with intense pain.

His heart raced madly and his muscles were convulsing. He felt pain as though his body was burning inside.

"Kamito... W-What's the matter!?"

Claire frantically picked up Kamito's body in her arms.

"...S-So hot...!"

"—It's the «Eternal Blood»'s side effects."

A calm voice was heard from behind.

Everyone turned to look back.

"Nee-sama, what's going on!?"

"The flames driving Kazehaya Kamito's body have burnt out. Since he used a technique that strained his body this much, the backlash must logically be quite astounding—"

"How could this...!?"

"Relax. This boy will not die from this. Once the «Demon King»'s power is completely withdrawn, it will be fine for Fianna over there to heal him."

"...By the way, you... And there I was, thinking this healing was so fast..."

Enduring the intense pain, Kamito poked fun at her.

"Healing was never my specialty in the first place."

However, the former «Queen» shook her head nonchalantly.

"Rubia Elstein..."

In response, Ellis readied her spear and glared at her warily.

"What is your goal?"

"...The Fahrengart family's daughter, huh."

Leaning against a stone pillar, Rubia looked at Ellis indifferently.

"...Stop it, Ellis."

"Kamito? But she—"

"...She no longer has the power to fight. Swinging your weapon at a person who cannot resist will taint a knight's honor..."

"No power remaining?"

"...That is true too. Indeed, it appears that my remaining power.. has vanished."

In a slightly sardonic tone of voice, Rubia spoke.

Blood had stopped flowing from the cursed armament seals on her arms.

"...To think a spirit contract could be severed—Is it that sacred sword's power?"

"I already tried it once before."

Supported upright by Claire, Kamito nodded.

Temporarily driving «Laevateinn» away did not solve the problem at its root. So long as the contract's connection remained, the spirit was surely going to continue making attempts to claim Rubia's life relentlessly.

However, defeating the strongest flame spirit's main body was absolutely impossible. It was not an opponent that a human elementalist could oppose.

Hence, Kamito had severed the contract connecting «Laevateinn» to Rubia.

He relied on the power of the «Demon Slayer»—Terminus Est.

Possessing the strongest anti-magic properties, this "cursed sword," capable of absorbing all curses, was simultaneously a sacred sword that could lift all spells. The contract exchanged between a spirit and an elementalist was also a type of spell.

In the past, Kamito had used Terminus Est to destroy the cursed armament seal transplanted on Velsaria Eva's heart. However, back then, he had only destroyed the cursed armament seal that was driving her spirit mad, rather than the spirit's contract.

(...But it looks like my gamble paid off.)

Kamito called upon the sacred sword in his hand.

(...Est, good job.)

—Yes. Because I am Kamito's beloved sword.

—Oh dear, what is Miss Sacred Sword muttering on her own about over there?

—Kamito is talking to me. The darkness spirit should shut up.

(I beg you, please don't argue in someone else's mind...)

Kamito pressed his temples and groaned.

"The contract was severed..."

Claire reacted and spoke up.

"In other words, the contract's price won't be exacted from Nee-sama, right?"

"...Yes. That should be the case—"

Kamito turned his gaze towards Rubia.

"I still have things to ask you. How could I let you die so easily here?"

Staring her straight in the eyes, Kamito asked.

"—Also, tell us already. Four years ago, in the shrine of the «Elemental Lords», what exactly did you see?"

"I..."

Rubia's eyes wandered in space for an instant.

Kamito did not fail to catch the emotions appearing on her face for an instant.

It was irrepressible fear.

This girl, the former «Queen», had destroyed the «Instructional School» in the past and was capable of dealings with Murders and the Theocracy's military. What could possibly inspire such fear in her—

After several seconds of silence—

She finally spoke.

"—Something beyond this world."

"Something beyond this world?"

"Yes. Very likely, it is the existence causing the current «Elemental Lords» to go mad. Furthermore, it is the true form of what you people call the Elemental Lords' miracle."

"...Nee-sama... What... What are you saying?"

Claire's voice was doubtful.

"Bear this in mind. The miracle transcending this world's rules and logic, granted to the victor of the «Blade Dance», does not actually grant the «Wish» you hope for."

"...What does that mean?"

While raising this question—

Kamito recalled what he heard in the past.

—The elemental lords' blessing is not as omnipotent as rumored.

(...I remember Greyworth saying something like that.)

Similarly, she was also someone who had had an audience with the elemental lords.

(...The «Elemental Lords»' miracle huh.)

Had these words come from an ordinary person, they could be dismissed as utter nonsense.

But she—Rubia Elstein—was formerly a «Queen» serving the elemental lord.

This was her reason for choosing betrayal at all costs, going as far as to abandon her position and duties, even sacrificing her own life.

The insanity of the «Elemental Lords». If it were real—

"But since the Demon King's awakening failed. Everything is too late now."

Rubia took out something from the sleeve of her military uniform and tossed it over to Kamito.

Kamito caught it reflexively.

"...?"

She had thrown a «Magic Stone», shining with red light.

"You can confirm the truth with your own eyes."

"W-Wait up, Rubia!" "Nee-sama!"

Kamito and Claire noticed her intentions at the same time—But it was too late.

Due to forsaking the «Magic Stone», the transfer magic activated.

Rubia's body turned into particles of light and vanished from the scene.

"Nee-sama, wait, Nee-sama...!"

Claire's voice echoed in the great hall.

"...Nee-sama."

The scene fell silent.

Finally—

"...With that, it means that «Team Inferno»'s leader has exited the stage."

Casting his gaze on the «Magic Stone» in his hand, Kamito muttered.

Muir Alenstarl had disappeared. Lily Flame had lost to Leonora.

And Leonora had also retired by her own volition.

"The only ace-class enemy left is the Theocracy's witch. Also, Luminaris of the «Sacred Spirit Knights», right—"

There were still ten-odd hours left until the «Blade Dance»'s final round ended.

Outside the crumbling walls, the sun had set.

Just at this moment...

"W-What!?"

"What is going on?"

Ellis and Rinslet screamed.

Beneath their feet, shining magic circles suddenly appeared.

"This is «Transfer» magic... Kyah!"

"W-What!?"

The same magic circles appeared around Kamito and the rest.

Then—

"...!?"

His view was overwhelmed by the dazzling light.

Part 4

The entire field of vision was pure white.

An intense dizziness caused all the sensations of the body to disappear instantly.

When Kamito opened his eyes—

In his view was a white ceiling.

"...This place is?"

Surprised, just as he was about to get up from the hard floor—

"Ouch—!"

"N-No! You should not be impatient to get up..."

He heard the cute voice of a girl.

"...?"

It was not Claire or the others. However, it was not completely unfamiliar either.

(This voice, I remember it's...)

Frowning, Kamito surveyed his surroundings by sight.

He saw—

"...Are you alright...?"

Looking straight into Kamito's face was a princess maiden in a crimson ritual outfit.

Gorgeous black hair draped over her face. Eyes like a timid pet's.

"You are...!"

Kamito remembered.

As the «Calamity Queen»'s successor, the princess maiden chosen as the «Fire Queen».

Reicha Alminas.

"...Reicha, why are you here? ...No wait, where is this?"

Still in confusion, Kamito asked.

Hearing him, the young «Queen» produced a gentle smile.

"Please calm down. All of you have returned to «Ragna Ys»."

Shocking words.

Chapter 3 - The Closure of the «Blade Dance»

Part 1

Having awoken, Kamito followed Reicha to another room.

His broken arm was simply secured between two pieces of wood. His elemental waffen, the two swords, were hanging at his waist. Although Reicha suggested handing them over to her for safekeeping, Kamito declined.

Along the way with Reicha in the lead, Kamito saw a garden surrounded by colonnades. He had some recollection. In the past, he had cross-dressed and sneaked in here with Fianna.

(...The «Divine Ritual Institute»'s True Sanctuary, I guess?)

He did not know why, but from the way it looked, he really had been transferred to «Ragna Ys».

"Do Claire and the others know the situation already?"

Kamito asked the «Queen» in front of him.

"No. Everyone will be notified together later. Kamito-san, you were all transferred here at virtually the same time, but because your injuries were too severe, you were moved here to rest and undergo simple treatment."

"I see..."

...Indeed, his body's pain had subsided substantially. Oh well, it was just the pain that had disappeared. In actual fact, he was probably still covered in wounds.

"Uh, my body is supposed to be the type that deflects holy-attribute magic—"

"Yes, I have already heard that from Fianna-senpai—no, Fianna-sama. Hence, uh, that method was used."

For some reason, Reicha's face went red with embarrassment.

"Th-That method... What method is that!?"

"U-Uh, for me to say it, really would be... Fianna-senpai was very proactive..."

"..."

Kamito resolutely pretended he heard nothing and shut up.

When they reached the door at the end of the colonnade, Reicha stopped. Pushing the door open, Kamito saw a spacious room as large as the garden earlier.

Very likely, this was prepared for VIP guests. There was a wooden table in the center where all the young ladies were seated.

"Ah, Kamito, you finally woke up."

Claire spoke up as soon as she spotted Kamito. She had changed out of her «Darkness Queen» ritual attire and back into her usual uniform with her twintail hairstyle.

"Kamito-kun? Are you okay? Does your body still hurt?"

"...Y-Yeah."

Kamito nodded. Sitting down beside Fianna, he asked quietly:

"Fianna, could it be... You actually did that in front of everyone?"

"Fufu♪, Reicha and the other's faces were all flushed bright red."

Fianna smiled mischievously.

"Relax. Claire and the rest did not see it."

"I-I can't believe you..."

"Hmm, what are you two whispering about?"

Sitting opposite to them, Ellis stared at them suspiciously.

"Oh, no, nothing."

Kamito frantically tried to brush the matter aside. Then with a serious face, he looked towards Reicha.

"..Uh, you can explain now, right? The reason why we were transferred here."

"Yes. It's quite hard to accept why we were suddenly transferred here."

"Since everyone has gathered, please do explain."

"Very well."

Faced with Claire and the other's queries, the princess maiden nodded lightly.

"«Team Scarlet», representing the Ordesia Empire, you have obtained victory in the «Blade Dance»."

Smiling radiantly, she made the announcement.

Part 2

"...Victory... Us?"

The first to break the silence was Claire again.

"What happened?" "How did this transpire?"

Ellis and Rinslet voiced their queries in succession.

Kamito was equally puzzled.

The «Blade Dance»'s final round, «Cross Fire» was scheduled for three days.

Only two days had elapsed since Kamito's group was transferred to the abandoned city. No matter how you counted it, there were at least ten-odd hours remaining.

However, Reicha spoke calmly.

"It is not surprising that you would find this puzzling. However, the «Elemental Lords» have issued this decree through us «Queens»: «Team Scarlet»'s blade dancing has brought them great joy and satisfied them."

"The result was decided by the «Elemental Lords»?"

"Yes. The «Blade Dance» is the supreme ritual for making offerings to the elemental lords. Hence, ultimately, everything is decided by the «Elemental Lords»."

"Yeah, that's true, but..."

Kamito muttered, his face displaying his reluctance to accept.

"Furthermore, based on the the battle results, «Team Scarlet»'s victory is indisputable. Apart from all members surviving, even the number of «Magic Stones» obtained is overwhelming. Even with ten-odd hours remaining, one would not expect the result to change."

"...«Magic Stones», did we really get that many of them?"

Kamito took out from his breast pocket the «Magic Stones» he had obtained.

The crimson spirit crystals, carved with the crests of various countries, numbered five in total.

The «Sacred Spirit Knights»' vice-captain, Alda Reed. The «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»'s tyrant dragon spirit user, Reglisse Roa. Muir Alenstarl. Leonora Lancaster. Finally, there was «Team Inferno»'s leader, the self-styled «Strongest Blade Dancer», Rubia Elstein.

Multiple ace-class and commanding officer-level elementalists from various countries had been defeated.

In terms of results in the team battle, this was overwhelming indeed.

"I defeated one. The «Sacred Spirit Knights»' special operative."

Next, it was Claire's turn to take out a «Magic Stone» and placed it on the table.

"Special Operative Ayla Cedar. A shadow spirit user."

"That makes six... Right?"

"Meow, meow..."

"Hmm, what's the matter, Scarlet?"

Under the table, the hell cat spirit seemed to be mewing desperately, trying to say something.

Puzzled, Claire picked her up in her arms. Scarlet stuck her tongue out.

Another two «Magic Stones» rolled on the table.

Carved on each of their surfaces was the crest of the «Sacred Spirit Knights».

"Scarlet, these, how did you get them!?"

Claire stared eye-wide in surprise. Apparently, she did not know what happened.

Reicha picked up the two «Magic Stones» and said:

"This one belongs to the «Sacred Spirit Knights»' Lansa Kairod-sama, while the other belongs to their captain, Luminaris Saint Leisched-sama."

"...Eh?"

"You defeated that Luminaris!?"

This time it was Kamito's turn to be shocked.

Luminaris the Paladin. Three years ago, she was Ren Ashbell's blade dance opponent in the finals. For the current festival, she was also one of the top candidates for victory along with Leonora.

"Uh, umm..."

Claire made a troubled expression and stammered.

"I've released Scarlet's true name. Kamito's darkness spirit knew this child's true name, then... I lost consciousness in the middle of it and can't remember much, but it seems like the power that had lain dormant for centuries was released all at once..."

(So she is the one who defeated Luminaris...)

Kamito stared intently at Scarlet in Claire's embrace.

The «Scarlet Valkyrie»—Ortlinde.

Despite looking like a cute hell cat, her true form was a high-level spirit who looked like an adorable young girl.

"Meow?"

The hell cat tilted her head in puzzlement.

Recalling the cat-eared girl's nude body, Kamito could not help but blush.

"In other words—"

At this moment, Ellis gazed at the «Magic Stones» on the table and murmured.

"«Team Scarlet» has defeated the commanders of the three other teams participating in the finals."

"Indeed. Precisely. As a further note, the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor»'s vice-captain, Yuri El Cid lost to the «Strongest Blade Dancer» while «Team Inferno»'s Lily Flame was defeated by Leonora Lancaster."

"May I ask, what happened to the Theocracy's witch—Sjora Kahn?"

(...Rinslet?)

Her helpless expression gave Kamito an instant sense of dissonance—

"«Team Inferno»'s Sjora Kahn destroyed her own «Magic Stone» and retired."

"...Uh?"

Everyone looked at one another.

(...Forfeited? That witch?)

Judging from her personality, it was difficult to imagine her admitting defeat.

Was there some hidden story, or perhaps—

(...That witch, what was she actually planning?)

According to Fianna, one part of Rubia's plan—regarding the «Darkness Queen»—was known to some extent, but—

"—Hence, currently, as already explained, the other countries' commanders and ace-class participants were essentially all retired from the stage. «Team Scarlet» is the only team that survived intact. At the point in time when you were all transferred, the «Knights of the Dragon Emperor» and the «Sacred Spirit Knights» respectively had two and one survivor. However, the elemental lords decided there was no need to continue the blade dance."

The «Fire Queen» explained calmly.

"—I... see."

Kamito stopped thinking briefly—

Then he exhaled.

"Victory huh... Us."

"Yeah... Seems like it."

Claire answered in shock.

...Somehow it doesn't feel real at all.

Meeting Claire by the side of the lake. Establishing a contract with Est. A decisive match against the Syphid Knights led by Ellis. Adding Fianna as a teammate and the battle against Jio Inzagi. Defeating Velsaria in the school ranking battle. The tough struggle during the «Tempest». Also during the «Cross Fire»—Settling things with Rubia Elstein.

After entering Areishia Spirit Academy under Greyworth's guidance, all sorts of things had happened.

Everything was for the sake of victory at the «Blade Dance».

"We finally reached this point..."

Tears appeared in Claire's clear eyes.

"Claire..."

Kamito placed his hand on her head.

(...It's this girl who gathered us all together.)

Before encountering Kamito—

She had always fought alone.

Wiping her tears with the sleeve of her uniform, Claire stared at Kamito with her reddened eyes.

"I-I wasn't crying, okay!"

"Don't force yourself. Cry if you want to cry."

"I-I already said I wasn't, so annoying..."

She puffed her cheeks in a sulking manner and hammered her fists against Kamito's chest.

The young ladies in the team all gazed at Claire's behavior with gentle eyes.

"Claire, thank you. You're the one who brought us here."

"Thanks to this, that'll show those people in the imperialist faction."

"Y-Yes... Everyone, thank you..."

Habitually lacking in forthrightness, Claire uttered words of thanks for once as she wiped her eyes.

"—Congratulations, everyone."

Reicha offered warm words of blessing.

"«Ragna Ys» has released news of «Team Scarlet»'s victory. In particular, Kamito-san's defeat of the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell, has become the topic of interest."

"...!"

Just at this moment—

Kamito realized something important.

(...This is bad.)

In theory, the proceedings of the «Blade Dance» were observed by the spirits sent out by the «Divine Ritual Institute» and should have been projected to various places on «Ragna Ys». In that case, inevitably, her battle with Kamito would be seen by large numbers of people.

In other words, the true identity of the unmasked «Strongest Blade Dancer» would also—

Probably having predicted that kind of reaction from Kamito, Reicha resumed a serious expression and spoke:

"...Kamito-sama, you are worrying about Rubia-sama, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

Claire and the girls also reacted and turned towards Reicha.

"Please rest assured. The «Divine Ritual Institute»'s spirits were unable to approach the blade dance that took place amidst the intensely burning flames. The images recorded from afar were also, uh... According to the supreme council's judgment, publicizing her true identity will cause a massive uproar, hence they have issued orders for corrections. Regarding

the true identity of the «Strongest Blade Dancer» being the «Calamity Queen» who had brought disaster to the continent in the past, only a small number of people including us «Queens» are privy to that fact."

"...I see."

Kamito secretly breathed a sigh of relief.

Since the spirits were unable to get close, then even if Rubia's true face was seen, her dialogue with Kamito probably was not overheard. Also what she said about the «Elemental Lords» going mad, the «Demon King»'s power residing in Kamito's body, and other things—

"Nee-sama—"

At this moment, Claire spoke up.

"Where is Nee-sama now?"

"...!"

—Right. Rubia Elstein had abandoned her «Magic Stone» and was transferred.

Then she should have returned to «Ragna Ys» as well.

"Well—"

The Queen bowed her head.

"Including Rubia-sama, none of «Team Inferno»'s members were transferred to the designated location—the return point that was set in the «Magic Stones»."

"...Huh?"

"What happened?"

"Very likely, the magic in the «Magic Stones» was overwritten. Those «Magic Stones» all received magic that was injected by us «Queens». Although ordinary elementalists probably cannot manage it, if it were Rubia-sama who was once renowned as the continent's premier princess maiden, it is possible—"

"In other words, they set a new transfer location..."

Kamito was suddenly struck by the thought of Muir who had disappeared without saying a word.

Living in darkness, did she have a place to return to?

"What is the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s decision on Rubia-sama?"

Fianna asked.

"I believe the «Divine Ritual Institute» will not send out pursuers directly. However, the Ordesia Empire's cadre might have received news already."

"...How did that..."

Claire bit her lip.

The «Calamity Queen» was the great sinner who had brought immeasurable loss to the Empire. Once her location was found, the Empire was sure to hunt her down.

Once the elite «Numbers» were sent to execute the arrest mission, would Rubia have any way of escaping, having lost the «Sacred Maiden»'s power?

"Nee-sama..."

Faced with Claire's worried murmurs, Kamito whispered softly.

"Don't worry. This «Ragna Ys» has countless secret subterranean passages. Surely she must have prepared her escape beforehand."

"Th-That's true..."

Claire nodded—

Suddenly, she collapsed towards Kamito as though suddenly struck with dizziness.

"Claire, are you okay!?"

"W-What happened?"

"...Y-Yeah, it's okay. I'm just... a bit tired."

"...After all, so much happened."

Not much time had passed since Rubia had imprisoned her to become the «Darkness Queen». Mentally, she must have accumulated a lot of fatigue.

Once her tense state of mind relaxed, the fatigue surged all at once.

"Sleeping quarters have been prepared at the shrine. Please have a good rest."

"I am very grateful for your kind offer. But before that, I would like to undergo a ritual purification. If possible, a bath would be good."

"Very well. A hot water bath, right?"

Reicha answered Fianna in a relaxed tone of voice.

"I'll go rest too."

Kamito suddenly felt sleepy. Despite the princess maidens' treatment, those were merely superficial measures to close up his wounds. His physical fatigue was reaching a limit.

"So, let's all go together, Kamito-kun. I'll help you scrub your back."

"...Okay. No wait! I-I'm going to sleep!"

"Fufu, just joking♪"

"Hmm, is that so... I-I would not mind too much, actually..."

Ellis awkwardly twiddled her fingers.

"Claire, you come for a bath too."

"Uwah, s-stop it, pervert princess!"

Accompanied by a noisy racket, the young ladies left the room together.

Kamito shrugged and prepared to leave as well.

"A-Ah, uh, Ren Ashbell-sama—"

Reicha stopped him.

"...!"

Hearing her say that name, Kamito held his breath.

Her gaze rested on Kamito's left hand.

(...R-Right!)

During the blade dance with Rubia, Kamito had used the «Vorpal Sword» and the seal of darkness had appeared on that hand. Anyone who saw it would quickly deduce his identity.

While Kamito was speechless...

"Oh, p-please rest assured. Those images, together with Rubia-sama's true face were all edited on this side. Because in a certain sense, your true identity will cause an even greater commotion than Rubia-sama's."

"I-I see..."

Kamito mentally breathed a sigh of relief.

"But the princess maidens at the «Divine Ritual Institute» should have found out already."

"No, editing the seal was my sole and arbitrary decision. Hence, most likely, I am the only one among the «Queens» who knows of this."

"Eh?"

"Although the demon sword of darkness was too difficult to hide, Kamito-sama, you were using dual swords. And that demon sword with the darkness attribute was also used by that «Nepenthes Lore» monster. Besides, no one could possibly connect your current appearance with Ren Ashbell... Oh, excuse me, I had no intention of insinuating—"

"Oh, no... That doesn't matter."

Kamito scratched the back of his head as he shifted his gaze away.

Suddenly, a question popped up in his mind.

"Your 'arbitrary decision'?"

"Yes. Last time when you two visited the shrine, Fianna-senpai made a request, hoping I could hide the fact if the seal on Kamito-sama's left hand ever appeared."

(Was that when I was unconscious...?)

"That princess really misses nothing."

Kamito smiled wryly.

As much as she would deny it, Fianna really did seem to possess the wisdom of royalty.

"...That's a great help. If possible, I hope you can keep my true identity a secret."

"Y-Yes..."

The «Fire Queen» nodded politely then—

"E-Excuse me..."

"Hmm?"

"At the time, what did Rubia-sama say?"

"..."

Should he tell this young girl? Kamito agonized over it for a while—

"What's your opinion on the «Elemental Lords»?"

Finally, that was what he said.

"...Eh?"

"Regarding the fact of the «Elemental Lords» ruling over the world."

"Everything goes according to the divine wishes of the elemental lords. That is what we were taught."

Reicha stared Kamito straight in the eye and answered thus.

"That's... true."

That was the consensus shared by the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s princess maidens.

Kamito recalled the words that Rubia left behind.

—You can confirm the truth with your own eyes.

"For the continent's future—That was what she said."

"For the continent's future..."

Reicha displayed a puzzled expression as she murmured.

Part 3

After entering the prepared sleeping quarters, Kamito fell on the bed.

Feeling as though his entire body would sink into the bed, it was a very comfortable sensation.

Having slept on hard ground throughout the final round, Kamito found the current sense of comfort quite touching.

"...It's over."

Looking up at the marble ceiling, Kamito spaced out as he muttered to himself.

The «Blade Dance» had drawn to a close with the best possible result—His team's victory.

Despite his concerns about Sjora Kahn's whereabouts, what Rubia had said regarding the «Elemental Lords», etc, Kamito's greatest personal goal was already accomplished.

Kamito placed the two swords in his hands lightly onto the bed.

Yes, the purpose of entering this «Blade Dance» was to take her back personally.

His hand stroked the Restia's blade that reflected no light at all.

As though she would disappear off to somewhere again if he did not do so—

(Restia...)

Enticed by a sense of sleepiness, Kamito's consciousness gradually drifted off to deep slumber.

—As promised, Kamito.

At this moment, he seemed to be hearing a tiny voice from the distance.

Like soft feathers, a comfortable voice was tickling his ears.

—Let me tell you about the truth three years ago.

Chapter 4 - The Truth Three Years Ago

Part 1

Kamito opened his eyes—

Only to find himself in a space enclosed by walls of stone.

(This place is...?)

After one revolution of looking at the surroundings, he suddenly noticed.

He had recollections of this place.

(...Could this be the «Elemental Lords»' sanctuary!?)

Kamito suddenly gasped. The flames flickered slightly on the candlesticks on the wall.

Before his eyes, a door stood open, leading to a long passage whose end was nowhere in sight.

It was the endless corridor that led to the True Sanctuary. Let alone ordinary princess maidens, even the continent's five «Queens» were forbidden from stepping inside.

The only exception was—

(...The «Blade Dance»'s winner, right?)

Muttering to himself in his mind, Kamito looked down to check out his appearance.

Gorgeous, waist-length black hair. A foreign dress with a fairly long hem, resembling ritual attire. His left hand was holding a dark and sleek longsword.

This appearance belonged to the «Strongest Blade Dancer» three years ago—Ren Ashbell.

(...A dream. Furthermore, it's the memories of three years ago.)

These were the memories he could not recall no matter how hard he tried.

(...In other words, I will proceed to—)

The sound of a door slowly opening behind him could be heard.

Turning his head back, he saw four princess maidens emerge, dressed in top ritual attire.

Naturally, those appearing here could not possibly be ordinary princess maidens.

They stood at the pinnacle of all princess maidens. Four «Queens».

Back then, Rubia's successor had not been decided yet. Hence, the Fire Queen's position was still vacant.

The «Queens» bowed respectfully towards Kamito who was the winner. Then one of them took a step forward.

She was slightly older than Kamito. On her neck was a necklace weaved from silver threads. Kamito recalled that silver symbolized the Queen serving the Holy Lord.

"Ren Ashbell—"

At this moment, the girl spoke.

"Have you already decided on the «Wish» to ask of the «Elemental Lords»?"

"—Yes."

Ren Ashbell answered in a clear and pure voice.

Back then, Kamito's voice had not changed yet. Although Greyworth had reminded him to avoid speaking too much, he was still able to maintain a girl's voice if it were merely two or three sentences.

"—Is that so? Very well."

The Queen nodded and smiled.

Kamito had expected the possibility of being asked about his «Wish»'s content and therefore thought up a different answer. However, that seemed to be unnecessary worrying after all.

(Right. The me back then—)

Did not have a «Wish» to fulfill.

The blade dancing that Kamito exhibited in the «Blade Dance» had greatly satisfied the Fire Elemental Lord. The anger incited by the «Calamity Queen»'s betrayal was hence appeased.

This already counted as returning Greyworth's favor. The witch had made Kamito participate in the «Blade Dance» because she wanted to appease the «Elemental Lord»'s anger towards the Ordesia Empire through Kamito's blade dance.

Greyworth did not hide this motive deliberately. Also, she did not say anything regarding Kamito's own «Wish».

However, she had warned that a «Wish» beyond one's means will lead to one's own demise.

The miracle of the «Elemental Lords» was not of this world.



Hence, the greater the «Wish», the higher the price demanded.

Rumors often circulated about the elemental lords' miracle being able to grant all «Wishes» but never mentioned anything about a price. However, the Dusk Witch was the «Blade Dance» victor twenty-four years earlier after all. Her words naturally carried weight.

In any case, Kamito did not have any «Wish» motivated by self-interest at all.

From the beginning, he had entered this «Blade Dance» only to fulfill her «Wish».

However, Restia had not told him her «Wish» yet.

She simply repeated that she would naturally tell him when the time came—

Hence, he finally arrived at this juncture.

Gripped in his left hand, the «Vorpal Sword» still remained silent.

"—Well then, please follow this endless corridor and keep going straight forward."

The Queen pointed to the other side of the door.

"The path onwards is a special place separated from normal space. Along the way, the corridor will have passages branching off to the side but absolutely do not step foot into them. In the past, a number of «Blade Dance» victors have vanished into the dimensional gap."

"...Got it."

Ren Ashbell gulped, nodded and stepped into the corridor that stretched ahead endlessly.

(...Not... good—Ahead of here...)

He felt a splitting headache. An ominous premonition.

Kamito knew clearly what the future result lay ahead.

(...No! If you continue forward, you will lose Restia—)

However, Kamito's consciousness could not interfere with Ren Ashbell.

This dream was simply reenacting memories of reality that had already happened.

"What an incredible space..."

Walking along the dimly lit corridor, the Kamito from three years ago muttered.

—Your hand is shaking, Kamito.

A girl's adorable voice sounded in his mind.

Kamito stopped walking and stared with displeasure at the demon sword of darkness in his hand.

"...Why didn't you speak earlier?"

—Sorry. Who knows if we might be monitored in the shrine, so there was no way to talk secretly. Furthermore, the Empire's intelligence agency is also investigating you.

"Couldn't you just speak in my mind like now?"

—Among high-ranking princess maidens, there exist those who can listen to mental speech. Do not be careless. On that point, this space is completely isolated from the outside world and is perfectly suited to secret conversations.

The demon sword of darkness dissipated into the air as particles of light.

Fluttering black feathers obscured Kamito's view as the adorable maiden in the pitch-black dress appeared.

"Stop sulking, Kamito. Next, let me tell you my «Wish»."

Restia smiled and drew her face close to Kamito's ear.

—I hope you can assassinate them. The five «Elemental Lords».

Part 2

(...!?)

His consciousness suddenly went dark in the dream.

In the next instant, Kamito found himself standing before a huge set of ornate gates.

This was the door at the deepest point—The door to the True Sanctuary where even Queens were forbidden from entering.

"...Seriously, can that actually be done?"

Kamito kept repeating the same question to Restia who had turned back into the demon sword's form.

Assassinating the elemental lords.

The reason was not clear why she would want that to happen, being a spirit herself.

(However...)

She said it. It was for saving the world.

This was the only way to return the world to normal.

(...Well then, I'll just have to realize her wish.)

Because to Kamito, she was the meaning of life itself.

—Don't worry. You are the strongest warrior, Kamito.

As though pushed by that voice, Kamito went up to the gate.

"I will do it. So long as it's Restia's wish."

—Thank you, Kamito.

The conversation ended there.

Kamito silently gripped the hilt of the «Vorpal Sword».

After he touched the gate's surface with one hand, the heavy gates slowly opened.

Appearing before his eyes was a massive stone staircase.

At the top were five dazzling lights.

"...!"

Kamito breathed in and took a step forward.

In this manner, he gradually climbed up—

Assassinating all the elemental lords straight away on the spot was impossible.

But killing at least one of them would be enough—That was what Restia had said.

(...The assassination target is the Holy Lord «Alexandros» who wields the greatest influence over the human realm.)

While walking, he looked up at the top of the steps.

(The Holy Lord's throne is over there, huh...)

Kamito stepped onto an intermediate landing. Suddenly...

—Your blade dance this time was outstanding.

As though shaking the space, the voice echoed in the giant hall.

"...!?"

Kamito stopped walking.

(This won't be easy, huh...)

He was too far from the target's position. This distance was not ideal for assassination.

However, if he continued to walk forward, surely he would be punished.

Placing the «Vorpal Sword» on the floor, Kamito knelt down on the spot.

—We can grant one «Wish» through a miracle to reward you for your blade dance.

—You, what would you request of us?

"I—"

Feeling as though his heart was being gripped tightly, Kamito whispered.

There was only one chance. If he failed, there was nothing but death waiting for him.

(...Is it really possible to kill them?)

Once again, he asked in his heart.

She did not reply. The sword's dark blade seemed to reflect Kamito's own heart.

"My wish... is—"

Keeping his head bowed—

"—The death of the elemental lords."

Kamito spoke the «Wish» she had entrusted to him.

While speaking, Kamito began to sprint.

Without thinking over unnecessary things, he closed the distance in one breath.

(—I am the weapon born for destruction.)

This was his mental switch, instilled in his body's memory through the teachings of the «Instructional School».

In that instant, the «Strongest Blade Dancer» turned into a cold-blooded assassin.

(—O lost darkness, residing in my hand, turn into my strength!)

Infusing divine power into the «Vorpal Sword»—the elemental waffe that had defeated numerous enemies—he drew his sword.

Hit and run. He will use the demon sword of darkness to pierce the elemental lord and then pull it out and withdraw as quickly as he could.

While calmly deciding on the sequence, Kamito rushed up the steps.

The «Elemental Lords» did not show any visible reaction. Originally, Kamito's body was supposed to be destroyed the instant he stepped beyond the landing.

It was as Restia described.

The miracle employed by the «Elemental Lords» was a power that did not come from the elemental lords' own abilities. Hence, the miracle would fulfill the «Wish» as much as possible.

It was akin to some kind of system. That was what she had told Kamito.

A miraculous power that even the rulers of this world, the «Elemental Lords», could not control.

At the same time, this power would bind the «Elemental Lords», the executors of the miracle.

Historically, this was an unprecedented «Wish».

Seeking to bring about the death of the elemental lords.

(—But that will last but for an instant.)

The elemental lords' death was an irregular «Wish».

The miracle's power was not going to destroy the elemental lords who served as its executors.

Very likely, the miracle would be interrupted once it judges Kamito's «Wish» to be invalid.

He was still a few more steps away from the «Elemental Lords»' thrones.

However, those few steps could easily be mistaken for an infinite distance.

Death followed closely like a shadow. If he did not make it in time, both Kamito and Restia were going to be annihilated.

(Two more steps—)

Kamito ran as he judged the distance visually.

The target for elimination was the Holy Lord. Kamito charged towards the central throne all at once—

—But just at that moment.

"...!?"

A sense of dissonance grew.

Approaching this close, only now did Kamito noticed for the first time.

Brimming with dazzling light, the central throne.

What should exist on top of it—

Did not exist.

(—How could this be possible?)

Kamito yelled in his heart.

Why was the central throne empty where the Holy Lord should be?

—Kamito, the situation is abnormal!

Restia's voice sounded in his mind. The situation was apparently beyond her expectation.

However, the assassination could not be stopped—

Withdrawing now meant only death.

"Ohhhhhhhh!"

Kamito infused divine power into the «Vorpal Sword».

Darkness erupted from the demon sword's blade and sliced light apart.

Kamito instantly switched targets and swung the demon sword towards the throne next to that of the Holy Lord's.

Towards the throne of the «Water Elemental Lord»—Iseria Seaward.

A sword strike with godlike speed pierced the shining light on the throne.

(...Killed!?)

His arm felt a definite hit. However—

"...!"

Kamito widened his eyes in surprise.

Amidst the dazzling light was—

A young girl, completely nude, with hair the color of shimmering water.

(...This is—an «Elemental Lord»?)

Stabbed into the girl's chest, the demon sword of darkness was exuding astounding miasma.

Then—

—Thank you. With this, I am finally liberated.

Opening her eyes slightly, the girl murmured.

(...Liberated? What's going on—)

Just as this question rose up in Kamito's mind...

—No good, Kamito! Hurry and leave!

Restia's screams echoed in his mind.

(...Uh?)

In the next instant, amidst the light where his sword was embedded, a great amount of darkness spewed out.

"...What...!?"

The overflowing darkness instantly swallowed Restia and Kamito.

His view became black. The sticky darkness entangled his entire body, gradually pulling Kamito's body into the abyss.

(...This... This ominous darkness, is it the true form of the elemental lords—?)

At this moment, Kamito noticed.

The sword that should be held in his left hand had suddenly vanished.

Most likely, he had loosened his grip when swallowed by the darkness.

(Restia... Where are you, Restia...!)

In the bottomless darkness, Kamito yelled.

However, despite his will to resist, Kamito's consciousness was gradually being devoured by darkness.

—Kamito, sorry... I—

"...Restia!"

Inside the mud-like darkness—

Kamito finally found signs of the sinking demon sword.

"Wait up, I'll save you right now..."

Just as he reached out towards the darkness...

Kamito suddenly noticed.

(...!)

The center of the vortex in the abyss that was swallowing Restia, over there was—

—Something.

Instinctive fear dominated his entire body.

Easily surpassing a human's mental strength, this fear was carved in the body of flesh.

At the bottom of the abyss.

—An existence beyond this world was writhing restlessly.

(...What...? What, that's...!)

Restia kept sinking towards the center of the abyss.

Desperately reaching out, his fingers still could not reach.

—Kamito, can you hear me? Kamito...!

"I'm here, Restia!"

Her voice gradually grew distant.

Kamito kept sweeping the sticky mud of darkness aside as he advanced.

—The promise back then, do you still remember?

"...Promise?"

The demon sword of darkness turned and drew a complicated pattern in the space.

Kamito frowned—He quickly realized her intentions.

A magic circle. She was preparing to invoke spirit magic while in the demon sword's form.

"Restia, you're going to..."

As soon as he touched the magic circle, Kamito's arm immediately turned into particles of light and disappeared.

(...This is transfer magic!?)

Restia was planning to transfer Kamito to somewhere else.

"No, Restia! I-I must stay with you together forever, Restia—"

—Listen, Kamito.

However, Restia began to speak in a calm voice.

Had she given up already—?

(...No! Restia intends to make a request to me!)

Kamito's entire body was enveloped in the glow of the transfer magic and was gradually disappearing.

Under these conditions, her voice continued to be heard.

—Kamito, if one day I should become no longer myself...

—Kill me.

"Restiaaaaaaaaaa—!"

Part 3

"...!?"

Amidst his sinking consciousness—

Kamito woke to a start.

"Huff, huff, huff..."

Breathing irregularly, he was also breaking out in cold sweat all over.

"Restia..."

"I'm here, Kamito."

Her voice came from above.

Clear and pure, a comforting voice.

Inclining his head to look up, Kamito found her deep dusk-colored eyes gazing quietly at him from above.

"...Restia!"

"Kyah!"

Kamito immediately lifted his body as though trying to jump up, causing the girl in the dark dress to emit an adorable scream.

"Seriously, don't scare people, Kamito."

"...S-Sorry."

Kamito stared intently at Restia before him.

Gorgeous black hair. Lustrous wings of pitch black.

Yes, this was no dream.

The contracted spirit girl whom he had lost three years ago was now returned to Kamito's side.

Through the spirit seal on his left hand, he could sense Restia's presence.

That filled him with incomparable joy.

...Just at this moment, Kamito realized.

She was sitting here, which meant that—

Kamito had been lying down, using her lap as a pillow.

"...Uh, you've been providing me with a lap pillow all this time?"

"Yes."

Restia nodded.

"Didn't we do this often in the past?"

"C-Come on, you..."

Kamito's face turned red and he could not help but turn his gaze away. Childhood aside, he felt quite embarrassed to be enjoying someone's lap pillow even after growing up.

Seeing Kamito's reaction, Restia chuckled and smiled.

"...My apologies. I made you see something frightening."

She gently caressed Kamito's head.

Her fingers sliding through his hair was a nostalgic feeling, causing Kamito to be speechless for a moment.

Finally—

"...The dream just now... You?"

Kamito asked.

"—Yes. Those were the lost memories of three years ago."

Adjusting her disarranged skirt hem, she nodded.

Kamito recalled the dream just now with a suffering mood.

The lost memories. The experiences of that day that he could not recall no matter what.

The truth of the elemental lord assassination.

Yes. Those were indeed Kamito's own memories.

"...On that day, I failed. The elemental lord assassination you hoped for."

In terms of results, Restia was swallowed by that mass of darkness and separated from Kamito.

Then engulfed by the same darkness, Kamito had awoken in the forest on the Empire's borders.

Having lost his memories of that day, inside the elemental lords' sanctuary—

"..."

After a long awaited reunion after three years, he had countless things to ask her.

Hence he was at a loss where to begin—

"Restia, you, who are you actually?"

Finally, he spoke.

"I am Restia Ashdoll. The guide tasked with the mission of awakening the Demon King."

Gazing directly into Kamito's eyes, the darkness spirit girl answered.

Part 4

"...Restia Ashdoll. Is that your true name?"

"Yes, because I was born from the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll, an existence akin to an alter ego."

"...Ren Ashdoll, huh."

Kamito repeated apprehensively.

"...I don't get it. Why would that guy's power be dormant in a human like me?"

"—That goes back thousands of years."

Restia sighed—

Then as though reminiscing, she closed her dusk-colored eyes.

"After losing the war against the five elemental lords, the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll, during the last instant of his life, invoked magic to reincarnate his power into a human male. This was for the sake of retrieving his power one day to exterminate the five elemental lords. That's Kamito—You."

"Why choose a human male?"

"Spirits cannot become vessels for other spirits—The same way that powerful spirits cannot make use of elemental waffen. Even an elemental lord is no exception. «Ren Ashdoll» predicted that the human race was going to start thriving in the future and gradually become able to command spirits. In that case, they were the most suited as a vessel for reincarnating his power."

That said, this is only my speculation—Restia added.

"Reincarnating in a male might possibly be for the sake of deceiving the eyes of the humans who obey the elemental lords. This is because it is a

commonly believed rule that only pure maidens are able to commune with the elemental lords."

"...Making so much trouble for me."

An inborn power to become an elementalist.

Only because of that power, Kamito was taken to that insane facility.

That said—

"...Thanks to that, I also met you, Restia."

Casting his gaze on his left hand's spirit seal, Kamito muttered softly.

Restia smiled lightly and continued:

"As for me, I shoulder the mission of guiding those who inherit the «Demon King»'s power, the will of the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll. Over millennia of human history, quite a number of humans appeared who had inherited the «Demon King»'s power. However, virtually all of their lives ended before they could encounter me. Or like the legendary «Demon King» Solomon, they would awaken in an irregular manner, devoured by the power they could not control, thereby turning into a concentrated cluster of resentment."

"Are you referring to that «Nepenthes Lore» monster?"

"Yes. That was a portion of the lingering «Demon King»'s power, given form through forbidden magic."

"...I get it now, yeah."

Restia was the spirit born to guide those who inherited the «Demon King»'s power. Hence, that was why she executed the will of the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll, to use Kamito to destroy his enemies, the «Five Great Elemental Lords».

Kamito could understand up to this point, however—

(...Obeying Ren Ashdoll to seek revenge on the «Elemental Lords». Is that really the goal?)

...Something didn't feel right somewhere.

"That mass of darkness was—"

Kamito asked.

"What exactly was the mass of darkness that swallowed us?"

The pitch-black «Wish» overflowing from the throne of the «Elemental Lords».

Was that the true appearance of the «Elemental Lords» who ruled the world—?

"—That is «something beyond this world»."

"Rubia used the same description. Is that some kind of metaphor?"

"No. It's literally as the words say, a substance belonging neither to «Astral Zero» or the human realm. An existence that came from another world."

"In other words, an unknown existence?"

"...I can't deny that. However—"

Restia paused and looked into Kamito's eyes.

"Undoubtedly, it caused the «Elemental Lords» to go mad."

...Kamito fell silent. He recalled what Rubia had said.

She said that the «Elemental Lords» were mad—

"Restia, at the time, you—"

Kamito licked his parched lips.

"...were planning to save the world?"

"In terms of results—Yes, that was supposed to happen."

—Three years ago on that day, Restia mentioned saving the world.

For that, it was necessary to assassinate the Five Great Elemental Lords.

But back then, the elemental lord assassination failed and Restia was swallowed by darkness.

"On that day, I was contaminated by the darkness from another world. But more disastrously, through me as a medium, «Ren Ashdoll»'s will was contaminated."

"...So something like that happened."

During the «Blade Dance»'s final round, Kamito had heard a voice calling the Demon King to awaken.

That voice was not Restia's.

It was the voice of the «Darkness Elemental Lord»—Ren Ashdoll.

"Ren Ashdoll's will intended to completely liberate that darkness using the «Demon King»'s power dormant in your body. The darkness that leads the world towards destruction—"

"You intended to exterminate the elemental lords, destroying that darkness at the same time?"

"No, I had no intention of exterminating the elemental lords."

Restia gripped her skirt hem tightly.

"Three years ago, what you killed was the «Elemental Lord»'s insane personality. The «Elemental Lord»'s original consciousness had not been completely contaminated and continued to linger in that darkness."

"...I see. That «Water Elemental Lord» was like that."

Piercing the elemental lord's throne with the «Vorpal Sword», Kamito had seen the young girl's figure.

Iseria Seaward.

The girl spirit was sealed underground in the «Abandoned City».

Speculating from the current conversation, she was probably the «Water Elemental Lord»'s consciousness that had split off—

"The plan three years ago was to use the «Demon King»'s power to liberate the «Elemental Lords»' personalities that had not been contaminated yet."

"But I failed—"

In terms of results, he had successfully freed the «Water Elemental Lord», but in turn, «Ren Ashdoll»'s consciousness, sealed inside Restia, was contaminated.

"By separating from the «Darkness Elemental Lord»'s will, I was able to escape contamination. I hoped to awaken you, Kamito, as the «Demon King» before Ren Ashdoll awakened inside me. And this time, it was for releasing the elemental lords from that darkness—«something beyond this world»."

For this purpose, Restia had formed an alliance with Rubia Elstein.

But even though their plans were aligned for awakening Kamito as the «Demon King», their final goals were completely different. Restia's goal was to liberate the true elemental lords. On the other hand, Rubia's goal was exterminating the elemental lords.

Rubia firmly believed in exterminating the insane «Elemental Lords». However, once the elemental lords were destroyed, Astral Zero would lose all order, thus bringing calamity to the human realm.

All along, Restia had advocated liberating the elemental lords but Rubia did not accept the words of Restia who carried Ren Ashdoll's will.

"—That said, it's impossible to assert that her method is wrong. The liberation of the elemental lords has already failed once. Furthermore—"

"«Ren Ashdoll» had awakened before I awakened as the Demon King."

"Yes. Although the «Darkness Queen» was there to suppress it at the time, who knows when Ren Ashdoll's contaminated will is going to reawaken again—"

"In other words..."

Kamito fell silent to organize his thoughts.

Three years ago, in order to rescue the «Elemental Lords» who were contaminated by the unidentified darkness, Restia made plans to assassinate the elemental lords.

However, the plan failed. Even though the consciousness of the «Water Elemental Lord» was successfully rescued, Restia and «Ren Ashdoll»'s consciousness ended up contaminated.

The contaminated will of «Ren Ashdoll» attempted to use the «Demon King»'s power to summon that darkness to the world on this side. Finding out about that, Restia planned to awaken Kamito first before «Ren

Ashdoll» could fully awaken, in order to make another attempt at liberating the consciousness of the «Elemental Lords»—

Kamito looked up.

"...What on earth should I do now?"

He clenched his fists tightly.

Just as Restia said, the «Demon King»'s power still existed inside Kamito.

Ren Ashdoll's contaminated will could resonate with the «Demon King»'s power and dominate Kamito again.

"This is decided by your own will, Kamito."

Restia held Kamito's hand lightly.

"I have already told you everything. Next, all you need to do is make a decision."

"I..."

"No matter what decision you make, I will stay with you."

"Restia..."

By the time he noticed—

Her sad dusk-colored eyes were already right in front of him.

"...!?"

Her gorgeous lips breathed out softly, tickling his face lightly.

Her mischievous smile was causing his heart to race—

"—What are you doing, Kamito?"

Suddenly.

A voice was heard, as cold as a sword's blade.

"...E-Est!?"

Kamito frantically jumped up from bed.

Without him noticing, the sword spirit was on the bed, completely nude except for kneesocks.

Her cold gaze stared straight at Kamito.

"...Kamito, what were you doing with the darkness spirit over there?"

Her face was expressionless as usual.

However, Kamito knew.

...She was angry. Est was very angry.

"E-Est, calm down..."

As Kamito tried to appease her, Restia interrupted.

"Oh dear, do you have any objections, Miss Sacred Sword?"

Restia smiled tenderly.

She withstood Est's freezing gaze head on.

"Darkness spirit, please leave. Kamito is my master."

"Do know that I am the one who first contracted with Kamito. Instead, you should be the one to stop hindering Kamito and my long awaited reunion."

"Kamito's current contracted spirit is me. Leave Kamito."

"No. If you must insist no matter what, please back up your words with power."

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

Invisible sparks were flying as the darkness spirit and the sword spirit glared at each other.

"S-Say, both of you..."

Kamito sighed helplessly.

"Can't contracted spirits just get along together?"

"No." "How rare for our opinions to coincide. I agree."

They answered immediately.

Restia stood up on the bed.

"We could settle this here and now. Let's see who is more worthy of being Kamito's contracted spirit."

"As you wish, darkness spirit."

"W-Wait up, you two—Don't damage the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s facilities!"

Ignoring his pleas to stop—

"O black lightning, even capable of incinerating souls to oblivion—«Hellblast»!"

Restia's released lighting smashed a wall in the room.

However—

"For me who possesses the strongest anti-magic properties, spirit magic has no effect."

Est remained standing amidst the sparking lightning as if nothing had happened.

"Nothing less from the legendary «Demon Slayer». However—"

"...!?"

Est widened her violet eyes. The intense lightning strike was nothing but a distraction. Restia instantly circled her way to Est's back.

"What about this?"

Pinning Est's arms behind her back, Restia dragged her over to the bed at the same time.

"...What do you... intend to do?"

"Fufu, to you, this would be something very embarrassing."

Restia pushed Est down and placed her fingers on the tip of Est's kneesock.

"Wha..."

Est instantly froze.

Her expression remained blank except her face turned red.

"Miss Sacred Sword, I remember you are particularly ashamed of exposing your bare feet, yes?"

"...That... is..."

In one motion, Restia pulled down the kneesock from Est's thigh to below the knee.

"Uwah!"

"Miss Legendary Sacred Sword, who could have thought you'd make such a cute sound?"

"...Don't do this... Stop..."

Est desperately tried to lift her kneesock, however...

"I refuse♪"

Restia continued with her task and pulled the kneesock down to Est's ankle.

"...Ooh, ah... Nooo..."

Tears glimmered in Est's eyes as she tearfully looked at Kamito.

Kamito sighed.

"Restia, w-what are you doing!?"

"Oh dear, Kamito, don't you want to see this child's bare foot?"

"...U-Umm..."

Kamito was instantly speechless.

Est absolutely refused to show her bare feet.

...To be honest, he could not deny his definite curiosity.

"See, Kamito wants to look as well."

"...No... Don't..."

Just as the fingers holding onto the kneesock's tip were about to expose the heel—

(...N-No!)

Kamito recovered his senses and shook his head.

"R-Restia, that's enough!"

He pulled her away from Est.

Restia puffed her cheeks and sulked.

"Hmph, Kamito is taking sides with Miss Sacred Sword now."

"No, it's not like we have enemies and allies here..."

While scratching his head, Kamito answered, feeling troubled.

"...Fine."

Restia sighed.

"Let's continue next time, Kamito."



"..."

"...!?"

Then she kissed Kamito on the cheek.

Spreading the black wings on her back, she flew out of the window.

"..."

Left behind, Kamito continued staring in a daze.

Beside him, Est swiftly pulled her kneesock up properly.

"Kamito, did you see it?"

"Huh?"

"Did you see my bare foot?"

Her mysterious violet eyes stared at Kamito.

"I-It's okay! Just a little, I didn't even see the heel!"

Kamito frantically shook his head.

"...Kamito is such a perv."

Still expressionless, Est's face went slightly red.

Part 5

Beautiful black wings were fluttering beneath the sunset sky.

Flying through the air, Restia lightly stroked her gorgeous black hair.

"How unsightly of me. To think I would be jealous."

Grumbling in self-mockery, she closed her dusk-colored eyes.

Then as though in contrition, she brought her hands to her chest.

"Sorry, Kamito—"

—I told you a lie.

Part 6

In a secret underground passage beneath the elemental lord's sacred domain of «Ragna Ys»—

Rubia Elstein was stumbling as she walked.

"...Guh... Ooh..."

She wheezed painfully as she made her way step by step along the walls of the passage.

Her body was fast approaching its limits.

A cursed armament seal was carved on her heart to sustain the contract with «Laevateinn».

The price was too great. Even if «Laevateinn» did not demand her soul, her life was not going to last long.

(...But I can't die yet.)

While coughing blood, she murmured in her heart.

Yes, not yet. She still had things to do.

(...How odd. Earlier, I had clearly prepared myself to die.)

Who could have thought that a contract made using life as a medium could be severed—

(Kazehaya Kamito, you never fail to surprise me—)

Rubia could not help but smile faintly.

In her mind, the image of his back surfaced.

The young man wielding dual swords.

—Rubia, I will protect you even if it means putting my life on the line.

He had promised her that.

Thump—A commotion in her heart.

This was not pain that tormented her body. Rather, it was a sweet kind of pain that gripped the heart.

A pain that she experienced for the first time, being a girl who had undergone a princess maiden's strict education since early childhood.

(...This unbelievable emotion, what is it?)

The unidentified emotion was causing Rubia anxiety.

(Now is definitely not the time for turbulent emotions—)

The world's fate was entrusted to Kazehaya Kamito's choice.

No matter what choice he made, the human realm was sure to undergo monumental chaos. Chaos would instantly sweep across the continent, finally erupting in a conflict surpassing the Ranbal War.

That was the only thing that must be avoided absolutely.

Suppressing chaos required overwhelming military strength.

There was the «Murders» organization that possessed extensive networks across the continent, her connections with the Demon King cultist faction in the top echelons of the Alphas Theocracy's military, as well as the private army whose core comprised «Instructional School» orphans.

(I will first use those girls to bring the Alphas Theocracy under my control—)

With burning flames in her ruby eyes, Rubia continued her way forward.

The underground cavern led to the eastern part of «Ragna Ys». The small flying craft that Lily Flame had prepared should be there.

Most likely, the Empire had already sent troops to pursue her. Rubia in her current state would not be able to offer any resistance if they sent «Numbers»-class spirit knights.

(I... must hurry...)

Just as Rubia stumbled as she supported herself with her hand against the wall...

A dagger sliced through wind to pierce Rubia's arm.

"...!"

Suppressing a scream, she stared into the darkness.

What struck her was a dagger used for assassination, dripping with blood.

"...Who are you?"

Rubia asked the darkness. In her current state, having lost the contracted spirit and the «Sacred Maiden»'s power, she did not even have the ability to sense the enemy's presence.

Next.

"To think you'd use 'who are you' as a greeting. Clearly we belong to the same team."

The light of magic glowed.

"Sjora Kahn, you..."

Rubia gritted her teeth.

Appearing out of the darkness was the scantily clad witch of the Theocracy.

Behind her, a crowd of girls in crimson military uniforms stood on guard, surrounding Rubia.

White masks appeared in the darkness. All of them held daggers in their hands.

"The Theocracy's «Snake» huh—"

Pulling the dagger out from her wound, Rubia groaned.

This organization of executors was not under the military's authority. Most likely, the Theocracy had issued orders for them to execute Rubia for failing her mission of winning the «Blade Dance».

(—In any case, they came to silence me.)

Rubia knew that country's dark side all too well.

It was only natural for the military to consider silencing her through death.

Rubia extended her right hand in a posture for counterattacking. Although losing her contracted spirit rendered her unable to use flame spirit magic, she was still able to use flames that did not originate from spirits—«Frost Blaze». Inside the narrow tunnel, she should be able to defeat two or three opponents.

(But that would be all I can manage. Given my current state—)

"The Theocracy's «Snake»? Sorry, you're wrong."

The witch jeered and snapped her fingers.

The girls in military uniform took off their white masks mechanically.

"Wha..."

All were girls whom Rubia had seen before.

These were the assassins with unusual powers whom Rubia had gathered from the continent—The «Instructional School»'s orphans.

A total of thirteen girls. They stared coldly at Rubia with dim and hollow gazes.

"The girls you cultivated have been absorbed outright into the military as my private army. Although they originally possessed a redundant sense of self, the Theocracy reeducated them."

"Witch, how dare you!"

Rubia released flames of absolute zero.

"Poor little princess."

Instantly, a dark figure appeared out of thin air.

The shadow roared, then its giant jaws expanded several fold and swallowed the roaring flames of blue in one gulp.

"...That spirit, could it be—"

Four sturdy limbs. Eyes glowing red ominously.

A pitch-black demon wolf making an astounding roar that shook the atmosphere.

"Good boy, «Fenrir»."

Sjora Kahn stroke the demon wolf's neck.

"Even the «Flames of Absolute Zero» that can freeze everything are useless against this demon ice spirit—The Laurenfrost's daughter really gave me quite an excellent present."

She walked over to Rubia who had collapsed, exhausted.

Her expression proceeded to change.

"What a pity. You were simply dancing in the middle of my palm."

"...!?"

Seeing the witch suddenly change her tone of voice, Rubia frowned.

"Although I did not obtain the «Demon King»'s body, it was still quite interesting. Breathing the so-called outside air is not bad after so long."

"...Who are you?"

"How unexpectedly slow of you, Sacred Maiden. There is only one who seeks the «Demon King»'s body."

"Could it be...!? You should have perished a thousand years ago..."

"Ha, that is what the contemptible «Divine Ritual Institute»'s history books recorded."

That which bore Sjora Kahn's appearance was stepping on the side on Rubia's face.

"...What... is your goal?"

"I've said it many times already. I want a complete body. This decrepit snake princess' body does not allow me to release my power. Oh well, it would be asking for too much—"

Her lips in a twisted grin, Sjora revealed the glowing spirit seal on her right hand.

A pattern of crystallized ice.

"I have found something interesting in this demon ice spirit's memory. For some reason, an alter ego of an elemental lord seems to be sealed in the «Abandoned City»."

"...A sealed «Elemental Lord»? How on earth...?"

"There is no point in telling someone who is about to die here."

Sjora's fingertip produced a dazzling flash of light.

"Kuku, don't worry. Your useless little sister will be joining you on the other side soon."

Just at this moment...

Accompanied by an astounding explosion, the underground cavern's walls crumbled.

"...What?"

Sjora Kahn hastily dodged.

The «Instructional School»'s girls swiftly surrounded her to protect her.

Where the cloud of dust and debris settled—

A strangely shaped giant was standing.

Formed from amorphous water, the giant looked female.

"Looks like we made it, Lily."

Sitting on the giant's shoulder, a girl spoke.

"—Cardinal."

The other girl jumped down from the giant's back.

She swiftly hurried over to the collapsed Rubia's side.

"It's... Lily huh..."

"Please don't speak. Save your strength."

Lily took out a healing spirit crystal from her bosom and pressed it against Rubia's arm.

A warm glow enveloped Rubia's arm and began to heal the wound.

Lily glared at Sjora Kahn.

"You've rebelled, witch!"

"Hey hey, in terms of using each other, the same goes for you eh?"

Jeering, the witch turned her gaze to the girl riding on the giant's shoulder.

"—That thing is the tactical-class militarized spirit «Apsara», I suppose."

"Yes. Obtained during the «Tempest», one of the three militarized spirits. «Colossus» and «Garuda» are already broken from use, but this is still unused so I saved it."

Tossing her ash-gray hair, Muir Alenstarl replied.

"The «Snake»'s elites should have gone to silence you?"

"All taken care of."

Muir answered immediately.

"Don't underestimate Muir. You will be killed too."

"Hierarch, please step back. Let us—"

The «Instructional School»'s girls warned in an inorganic voice and readied their daggers.

"Heh, these third-rate flunkies, who didn't even qualify as one of the «Ranked», you intend to fight Muir huh—"

Muir smiled in amusement.

"If you want to die that much, Muir will play with you, okay?"

"...!"

The «Instructional School»'s group wavered.

Top combat specialists in the continent were faltering from a single girl's intimidating presence.

However, Sjora shrugged and stepped forward.

"Aren't you confident? But this is your last militarized spirit. If you were to fight all my pawns, you should understand that this thing will break halfway through."

"Then Muir will just destroy this entire cave."

"Are you stupid? You'll die too."

"Muir won't die. Surely, Muir will live for Onii-sama."

Muir's expression remained unchanged as she murmured softly.

"...Damn «Monster». Insane."

Sjora clicked her tongue.

"Muir is serious. You don't want to lose the majority of your forces here, right?"

Hearing Lily's words, Sjora instantly displayed a look of contemplation—
"...Retreat. This is a waste of time."

Next, she walked towards the darkness.

Her subordinates also followed quickly behind her and disappeared.

"..."

A few seconds' silence. Then—

"Muir, well done. I never knew you were that good at bluffing."

"That was no bluff. Muir really is serious."

Muir tilted her head in a daze.

"What, y-you intended to bury us alive here!?"

"If you're lucky, you won't die."

"...Sigh. Jeez."

Lily sighed deeply and turned to Rubia.

"—Thank goodness you are safe, Cardinal."

"Sorry, Lily. The «Instructional School» people have been taken away. This is my oversight."

"No, this is because I didn't gather enough intelligence. Although I knew the Theocracy could not be trusted, I never expected them to act this swiftly."

"They most likely conspired together with «Murders». With the «Divine Ritual Institute» and the Empire's spirit knights in pursuit, there is no place for me to hide now."

The situation had changed dramatically.

Since her military forces had been taken by the Theocracy, Rubia had to reconsider her direction anew—

Rubia stood up—

"What about you?"

"...Huh?"

"Like I said, there is currently no place for me to stay. I've lost my power as an elementalist. There is no need to follow me."

"You must be joking."

Lily knelt down before Rubia.

"You were the one who freed us from the «Instructional School» and treated us like people. I have no intention of serving anyone else. Henceforth, please continue to command me as you please."

"...I see."

Rubia placed her hand on Lily's shoulder.

"—Well then, follow me. Lily Flame."

"Y-Yes!"

"It can't be helped."

Muir jumped down from the militarized spirit.

"Muir will ally with you as well. Having no place to go is shared by Muir as well. Although Muir hates you, she hates the Theocracy's people even more. Also, Lily can't do anything without Muir by her side."

"Th-That's you, okay! Without me, you can't even cook!"

"Lily, shut up or be killed."

"Your request for an alliance is accepted, Muir Alenstari."

Crimson hair fluttered as Rubia walked towards the depths of the darkness.

...As though crushing underfoot the destiny waiting for her ahead.

"—A war is about to begin."

Chapter 5 - Rinslet's Resolve

Part 1

"...Phew, it feels so good after a bath."

In the single room prepared at the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s shrine—

Having finished her ritual purification, Claire was changing her uniform.

Holding her favorite ribbon in her mouth, she tied her hair into twintails.

Next, her team was going to make a visit to the castle they had stayed at previously.

Suddenly, Claire looked out the window.

It was already dusk outside.

Just earlier, they were still blade dancing in the «Abandoned City». It seemed like a dream now.

"...In the end, I didn't get a chance to talk much with Kamito."

Buttoning her shirt, Claire sighed.

She clearly wanted to spend time with Kamito alone and talk more—

(...Seriously, so much happened.)

To be honest, she was still very confused.

The whereabouts of the sister who disappeared. The reason she revealed to explain her betrayal.

The «Demon King»'s power dormant in Kamito—

Also—

(...U-Unbelievable. To think that Ren Ashbell-sama's true identity is...)

Her cheeks went hot instantly.

Ren Ashbell was the girl whom Claire admired.

All along, Claire had regarded her as the ideal elementalist and worked hard to that end.

Never did she expect—

(...T-To think she turns out to be Kamito.)

But at that time, Kamito definitely said.

I am the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell—

Instantly, Claire's heart began to race.

(Kamito back then, was so very... cool.)

Lying on the bed, Claire buried her face in the pillow.

She hugged the pillow tightly and rolled from side to side in that manner.

(A-Also...)

She looked up from her pillow and touched her lips softly.

(We even... k-kissed.)

Her heart pounded nonstop.

As soon as she recalled it, a hot sensation rushed through the inside of her body.

Her mind became filled with Kamito.

"...~! So annoying, what's with this..."

Claire began to pound away at the pillow. At this moment—

"...Meow?"

"Uwaaa, Scarlet!?"

Climbing onto the bed was the hell cat spirit, wrapped in flames.

She stared with her round eyes, tilting her head in puzzlement.

"Seriously, don't scare me."

Claire put down the pillow...

And picking up Scarlet, embraced her gently.

"...Thank you, Scarlet."

As she stroked Scarlet's head, the cat purred in comfort.

Her gratitude towards Scarlet could not be contained in a few words. Only thanks to the calls of this hell cat spirit was Claire able to recover her consciousness when she fell to become the «Darkness Queen».

"...Speaking of which, your true name was released."

Claire suddenly recalled.

The «Scarlet Valkyrie»—Ortlinde. The lovely girl who was clad in a dress of flames.

Reportedly, she had fought in the Spirit War several thousand years ago as one of the primeval spirit weapons.



At the time, Claire had quickly lost consciousness and did not have the chance to talk with her more—

"Meow?"

Judging from the way she looked, Scarlet did not remember what happened back then.

Claire placed her right hand lightly on Scarlet's head.

As she supplied divine power, the flame seal gave off dazzling light.

"True name release—Awaken, «Scarlet Valkyrie» Ortlinde!"

With divine power poured into Scarlet's entire body, intense flames surged.

However—

"..."

Scarlet's appearance remained unchanged.

She did not transform into that girl.

"...Strange."

Claire tilted her head.

"...Whatever."

Since she had released it once already, with further training, she would surely release it again.

Furthermore, adding more rivals would be troublesome too—She murmured softly.

Looking up, she suddenly spotted a figure outside the window.

Rinslet.

"What is she doing?"

The way she looked from behind was rather unenergetic.

"Come to think of it, she didn't say much during the ritual purification either."

Claire stepped onto the window sill and jumped out.

Part 2

Rinslet was walking towards the Grand Shrine's garden.

Coming before a spring in the center of the garden, she reached out towards the water surface that was reflecting moonlight.

(...Spirit magic?)

Claire was watching in surprise when—

"—«Ray of Frost»!"

Rinslet was softly reciting an incantation.

This was basic ice-attribute magic for freezing the target.

Resonating with Rinslet's divine power, the spring's water surface gave off faint light.

In the end, she slumped her shoulders dejectedly.

"...Rinslet, what are you doing?"

"Claire!"

Rinslet frantically looked back.

"N-Nothing!"

"Liar."

Claire asserted. No matter what, they were longtime childhood friends. It was too easy to see that something was amiss.

"During the ritual purification just now, you were uncharacteristically quiet. What happened?"

"...N-None of your business, Claire."

"W-What, to think I was so worried..."

"H-Hmph, redundant!"

Rinslet suddenly turned her face away and prepared to leave.

"Wait up...!"

Claire swiftly grabbed Rinslet by the arm.

...I can't leave her alone.

She could see traces of tears on the side of Rinslet's face.

"Rinslet, you..."

Looking down at the arm she had grabbed, Claire suddenly noticed.

The spirit seal that should have been carved on Rinslet's right hand was nowhere to be found.

Claire remembered that back when she was unable to use her spirit, the seal would be in a state that was almost invisible to the naked eye. But even so, it could still be confirmed by close examination.

However, Rinslet's spirit seal had vanished completely.

"What happened? Where's your «Fenrir»?"

"..."

Rinslet turned her gaze away in embarrassment.

"—The bond is weakened. Even near a spring, I can't produce cold air."

Her voice was trembling. Usually arrogant, she was quite dispirited currently.

Claire looked towards the spring. There was a thin membrane of ice on the water surface.

But that was all. The power of Rinslet's «Ray of Frost» was not limited to this level, of course.

Originally, she should have been able to freeze the entire spring's water instead.

"What happened?"

"..."

"Tell me. We're teammates."

"Claire..."

Rinslet bit her lip hard.

"...During the battle with the witch, I lost Fenrir."

Rinslet recounted how Fenrir was devoured by the demon spirit during the battle with the witch. That demon spirit apparently had the ability to steal contracted spirits. Even her spirit seal disappeared as well.

Hearing that, Claire—

"...To go so far as stealing spirits, that behavior clearly contravenes the «Blade Dance»'s ethos!"

Anger was causing her hair to stand vertically.

The Blade Dance festival was not a war for mutual violence. Instead, it was a blade dance offering to the elemental lords.

Trying one's best was required but that did not imply unscrupulous means were acceptable.

"Raise objections with the Alphas Theocracy."

"—That's most likely futile."

Suddenly a voice appeared from behind.

Looking back, Claire found Fianna and Ellis at the garden's entrance.

"I heard from Ellis about what happened."

"Sorry, I disclosed it without consulting you, because I was thinking Her Highness the imperial princess might have some solution."

Ellis bowed her head politely.

"No, I don't mind..."

"What do you mean by futile?"

"Sjora Kahn is ostracized even among the Alphas Theocracy's royal family. She is regarded as the taboo child who employs demon spirits. Oh well, it's similar to my situation except through completely different causes.

However, she wields authority through her connections with part of the military and the Demon King cultists based inside the Theocracy. Even if objections are raised with the Theocracy, they will surely be ignored."

"So what can be done? Do you know anything about that demon spirit?"

"Regrettably, I don't know much about that spirit-stealing spirit either. It's «Bandersnatch»—The Theocracy's secret spirit, right?"

Fianna shook her head.

Information regarding demon spirits and their rare users was extremely scarce.

"Is there nothing we can do..."

Ellis hugged her shoulders.

"...No, there must be something."

Claire was murmuring when...

The voices of princess maidens could be heard coming from the «Grand Shrine»'s building.

"—Everyone, the horse-drawn carriage is ready."

Part 3

Inside the carriage prepared by the «Divine Ritual Institute»—

"So, Fenrir was..."

Hearing what had happened, Kamito remarked quietly with a grave expression.

(...So that's why she is so disheartened.)

Kamito knew very well the pain of losing a contracted spirit.

That feeling was like having one's body ripped in half.

"So we're now considering if there's any method to retrieve «Fenrir»—"

"Sjora Kahn still hasn't been located?"

"Apparently, even the «Divine Ritual Institute» has not been able to ascertain «Team Inferno»'s location."

Fianna shook her head.

Sjora Kahn was a witch who could not be underestimated. Catching her would probably be very difficult.

Besides, it was unknown whether a spirit whose contract was voided could be retrieved in the first place. If «Fenrir» was already stolen completely—

(Then they could only rely on a miracle...)

"So, I was thinking—"

At this moment, Claire brought up a topic with a serious expression.

"I'll use my «Wish» to get «Fenrir» back, how's that?"

"Using your «Wish», Claire?"

"Yeah. I've already seen Nee-sama and heard the truth. So I don't have any «Wish» to realize anymore. If it's the «Elemental Lords»' power, taking back a spirit whose contract was voided should be possible."

"N-No way. That «Wish» clearly belongs to you—"

"Don't you already have a «Wish» you must realize? A-After all, I owe you so much, with this I won't need to go out of my way to pay you back."

"Claire..."

Rinslet's eyes of jasper wavered subtly.

"—About that, let's wait first."

Suddenly, Kamito interjected.

"Huh?"

"About the «Elemental Lords»' miracle, I think it's better to be more cautious. Rubia's words are quite concerning too."

"Well..."

—The miracle transcending this world's rules and logic.

—Does not actually grant the «Wish» you hope for.

That was what she definitely said.

He was not trying to advocate complete belief in Rubia's words.

But Kamito had witnessed it.

—In the memories three years ago, the «Elemental Lords»' miracle devoured Restia.

Transcending this world's rules—«Something beyond this world».

If that was the miracle's true form—

(...Relying on that power is far too dangerous.)

"—Indeed, perhaps that's true. But..."

Claire bit her thumb's fingernail.

"I believe we should search for another method."

"I agree with Kamito-kun. Although I was formerly a princess maiden at the «Divine Ritual Institute», after hearing Rubia-sama's words, I cannot find any reason not to doubt the «Elemental Lords»."

Hearing Fianna's words, Rinslet bit her lip hard.

"...I-I know. It's as you say."

But she still nodded.

"...Claire, your kind intentions are enough."

"Y-Yeah.."

"I will try to investigate that demon spirit."

"Yes, the Fahrengart family will also spare no effort in providing assistance."

"Speaking of demon spirits, Greyworth might know something."

"E-Everyone..."

Rinslet covered her eyes with her uniform's sleeves.

Then she looked up.

"S-Staying depressed would be too unseemly!"

She displayed her usual elegant smile.

The carriage stopped before the castle.

Holding Est in sword form, Kamito walked towards the lobby.

He stared into the starry sky as he walked.

(By the way, where did Restia run off to?)

After disappearing from the Grand Shrine, she still had not returned.

Oh well, since I can feel the connection through the spirit seal, there shouldn't be a problem—

(She's always been willful from the very beginning...)

Kamito sighed in his heart.

As soon as Kamito's group approached, the castle's gates opened from inside.

"Welcome back, milady."

The maid Carol had come to welcome them.

Her radiant smile healed everyone's hearts.

"Carol, did anything happen while I was away?"

"Yes. Although there were three instances of fire disasters when making breakfast, luckily, they were all confined to milady's room."

"...Sigh. If that's where it ends, I guess it's alright."

"...Of course it isn't."

Kamito calmly remarked snidely.

...Employing such a maid, was the Laurenfrost home really alright?

"Welcome back, Onee-sama, Onii-sama!"

It was Rinslet's younger sister Mireille. Skipping along, she rushed over and hugged her sister.

"S-Seriously, Mireille, mind your manners!"

Rinslet instantly put on airs like an elder sister and began to lecture.

However, her hand was gently stroking her sister's head... As usual, she liked to indulge her younger sister.

After separating from her sister, Mireille hugged Kamito next.

"Hmm..."

The young ladies' icy stares stabbed him in the back.

"Also, Onii-sama, congratulations for your victory!"

"L-Like I said already, stop calling me 'Onii-sama'."

Kamito was feeling overwhelmed.

"Mireille-sama, please stop troubling Kamito."

At this moment, someone reached out from the side and pulled Mireille off from Kamito.

"Ah, Milla, what are you doing!?"

Grabbed by the collar, Mireille struggled violently.

The new arrival was the former leader of the «Rupture Division», Milla Bassett, dressed as a maid.

She gazed at Kamito with her heterochromatic eyes then said:

"Kamito, welcome back."

"Yeah, I've returned, Milla."

Kamito placed his hand on Milla's head.

"...Ah, ooh..."

Instantly, Milla froze and her face went red.

"...Eh. Kamito-kun, as expected of the Demon King of the Night."

"Th-The title of the «Demon King», having one title as the Demon King of the Night is enough... I-Isn't that what you said?"

"H-Hold on, you girls, are you misunderstanding something?"

Kamito frantically tried to explain himself.

—At this moment.

"Good grief. You're still the same, lad."

An exasperated voice came from the staircase inside.

"...!"

Apart from Kamito, everyone straightened their posture and stood in a line.

"—Members of «Team Scarlet», congratulations on your victory."

Applauding as she descended the stairs, Greyworth arrived, dressed in a suit.

"You, umm... Has your body recovered?"

Hearing Kamito's stiff gesture of concern...

"Fufu, to think the first thing you worry about would be the body. Looks like you find my body impossible to forget."

"W-What nonsense are you talking about, how could that be true!?"

"K-Kamito, even towards the Academy's director, you..."

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!"

The young ladies' stabbing glares were really hurting his neck.

Seeing their reactions, Greyworth smiled with amusement.

"Kamito, come to my room."

Then she ordered in a tone of voice that tolerated no objections.

"Huh?"

"I will teach you the final secret technique."

Part 5

Enduring the girls' icy gazes on his back, Kamito was led to the room.

Greyworth sat down on the sofa and picked up a wine bottle from the table.

"Just sit down there. Want a drink?"

She poured the amber liquid into a glass.

"You're still recuperating, right? Watch what you drink."

"Oh my, how rare, You're worried about me?"

"...Like anyone would worry about you."

Kamito silently took the glass away.

"...Fine, what's this about? That final secret technique you mentioned just now."

The night before the final round, Kamito had inherited the Absolute Blade's secret technique.

«Last Strike»—A countering sword skill for using against humans. Due to teaching this sword skill, the «Dusk Witch» had lost her power as an elementalist.

"Don't be so impatient. Once you master this blade dance move, you'll become the true Demon King."

"...True Demon King? What's this about?"

Kamito was shocked.

Greyworth lay down on the sofa and said:

"Let me teach you now—Bursting Blossom Spiral Blade Dance of the Night."

"..."

"..."

Silence fell.

"...You fiend."

Kamito could not help but grab Greyworth by the collar.

"Fufu, once you learn this secret technique, all the girls in the Academy will quickly fall. However, if you're the one using it, perhaps they'll lose their minds because it's too intense."

"H-How can you still consider yourself the Academy director!?"

Kamito roared angrily.

"In that case, you may test it out on me. After all, I can't commune with spirits anymore. There's no need to stay pure, right?"

Using her fingers to push her neckline open, her black underwear came into view.

"S-Stop playing with me..."

Kamito blushed and turned his gaze away.

"Fufu, the lad is so cute."

Greyworth laughed in her throat then sat properly on the sofa again.

"First, let me praise you. Well done. As expected, summoning you to the Academy was not a waste of effort."

"Praise from you makes me feel worse."

While retorting—

"...Oh well, in any case, let me thank you. Thanks to you, I was able to meet my comrades at the Academy—"

Kamito took off his glove, revealing the spirit seal on his left hand.

"I've also retrieved what's precious to me."

"It's your own power that allowed you to retrieve the darkness spirit. I didn't do anything."

Greyworth shrugged.

Kamito sat down on the opposite chair then—

"...Greyworth, let me ask you something."

He posed a question.

"Oh?"

"—Twenty-four years ago. What happened on the day you obtained victory in the «Blade Dance»?"

"...How nostalgic."

"Twenty-four years ago on that day, you prayed to the «Elemental Lords» for a miracle and obtained eternal life and youth."

"...It's not really eternal life and youth, that."

Greyworth's gaze turned sharp.

"Yes, you did say that before. The elemental lords' miracle is not actually omnipotent."

"However, the ability to achieve something like that can only be called a miracle. At the time, I needed to guard the Empire, even if it meant planting the seeds of disease personally into my own body."

The witch pointed to her heart.

"A cursed armament seal. Transplanted on the heart."

"Lurie Lizaldia of the «Numbers» already told me."

"...That talkative lass."

Greyworth clicked her tongue.

"You, what did you see inside the «Elemental Lords»' True Sanctuary?"

"You should know about the «Geis», right? What is seen and heard in the «Elemental Lords»' True Sanctuary cannot be disclosed at all. That is the strictest contract."

"You don't need to say it out. Just answer a question."

Kamito shook his head.

"Did you see that darkness inside the True Sanctuary?"

"Darkness?"

She displayed a surprised expression.

"What is that about?"

(...Greyworth didn't see that?)

Kamito was surprised.

—At this moment, suddenly, the window in the room opened and black wings fluttered and spread.

"Wha..."

Kamito stood up from his chair.

Landing on the windowsill—

The darkness spirit whose dress was colored like night.

"It's been a while, «Dusk Witch»."

"Hmph, the darkness spirit huh."

Greyworth smiled impertinently.

"Restia, what happened? Where did you go just now—"

"Kamito, the Theocracy's flying vessel is secretly heading towards the «Abandoned City»..."

"...What?"

An ominous feeling flashed across his mind.

"The «Blade Dance» already ended. Why return to the «Abandoned Capital»..."

"She is likely targeting—"

Saying that, Restia looked up into the sky—

"The «Water Elemental Lord»'s alter ego, right?"

Chapter 6 - Back to the Abandoned Capital

Part 1

Kamito immediately summoned his teammates to the castle lobby.

Everyone was about to sleep at this point in time, hence the girls all displayed displeased expressions.

Only Scarlet was still very energetic.

(...Perhaps it's because cats are nocturnal.)

"...Jeez, what happened? The «Blade Dance» already ended."

"I will have you know that I sleep regularly on the dot at nine."

Claire and Ellis had their arms akimbo as they remarked angrily.

However, since they were both wearing cute pajamas, they were totally not intimidating.

...Rather, they were quite adorable.

"Sorry, there's an emergency. Things are very bad."

"What emergency?"

"The Alphas Theocracy's flying vessel seems to be heading towards the «Abandoned City»."

"...Abandoned City?"

Claire frowned in surprise.

"What would she do in that kind of place at this time?"

"Most likely, her target is Iseria."

"...!"

All the team members were shocked. That was the girl with hair the color of shimmering water who had assisted them during Claire's rescue.

"Why... Why target that child!?"

Rinslet demanded from Kamito.

"Iseria is a top-ranked spirit. Sjora perhaps intends to capture her as a contracted spirit."

"How could that...!"

Probably recalling the demon spirit's theft of Fenrir, Rinslet cried out sorrowfully.

(Or perhaps, for some other purpose...)

Iseria Seaward.

Three years ago on that day, Kamito had liberated one of the elemental lords.

Did the witch act because she found out about that—?

"But how did those people find out about Iseria?"

Ellis voiced her puzzlement.

"Most likely by tracing Fenrir's memories."

Greyworth descended slowly down the stairs.

"Through the spirit seal, a contractor can see fragments of the contracted spirit's memories. That spirit probably appeared in Fenrir's memories."

"No way..."

Rinslet wavered.

"Greyworth, seeing as you employ demon spirits, do you know any method for retrieving «Fenrir»?"

"My condolences. I am a knight and not an authority on spirit research."

Greyworth shook her head.

"Besides, the category of demon spirits is simply something that the Spirit Investigation Association defined on their own. An umbrella term for spirits whose mental structure cannot be analyzed. Hence, there is basically no information on individual demon spirits unless they have been researched specifically."

"...I see."

"However, speaking of saving that demon ice spirit, that's not totally impossible."

"Eh?"

"Although the demon spirit «Bandersnatch» possesses the power to overwrite existing contracts, that effect can be considered a type of spirit contract. Being a spirit contract, it must be accompanied by a certain something—"

"...A spirit seal?"

"Smart lad. On «Fenrir» that was taken away, there should be a spirit seal carved by demon spirit. Aiming there—"

"Destroy it with *Terminus Est*, right?"

Kamito gripped the «Demon Slayer»'s hilt firmly.

"However, that's only a possibility. I don't know that much about that demon spirit's characteristics."

"...Yeah, got it. But it's worth a try."

Kamito nodded at Rinslet.

"Anyway, I think we should hurry over to the «Abandoned City». We can't passively let her get taken away."

"Eh, yeah, that's right! I promised that child that I'll definitely bring her out of that place."

"...However, we still don't know how to lift the seal."

"I have some ideas on that."

As Fianna showed hesitancy, Kamito responded.

If the girl he saw in his dream really was the liberated «Elemental Lord»—

Then the seal could be lifted using her true name as the medium.

(...Also, there's something that I must ask her no matter what.)

"But how do we get to the «Abandoned City»?"

Ellis raised a question.

"Can't we use the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s transfer magic?"

If they explained the situation to the «Divine Ritual Institute», they probably would lend out the «Gate» for transfer.

"That requires a ritual. Also, the «Magic Stones» can only transfer to fixed locations."

Fianna shook her head.

"Then what should we do—"

Just as Kamito gritted his teeth in frustration...

"Good grief, looks like my power is needed."

Greyworth shrugged.

"Didn't you lose your power completely...?"

"The word power is not limited to an elementalist's power, you know?"

Greyworth smiled.

"Head over and wait at the tip of «Ragna Ys». I will prepare equipment for you."

Part 2

"...Telling us to wait here, what exactly is she planning?"

"The director will have arrangements."

An hour later, Kamito's group had gathered at the northwestern tip of «Ragna Ys».

The night air was very cold. Despite the barrier covering «Ragna Ys» entirely to stop the wind, the air itself was enough to make the skin chilly.

"...So cold. My hands are almost freezing."

Under thick winter clothes, Kamito shivered.

"It reminds me of the training camp at the Laurenfrost snow mountains when we first entered the Academy."

"Hmm, that was hell."

Hearing Claire remark as she hugged her hell cat tightly, Ellis expressed full agreement.

"This level doesn't really count as cold."

Only Rinslet, who was born and raised in a land of snow, remained unfazed.

"...Say, that looks very warm. Let me hug Scarlet too."

"I don't really mind, but Scarlet doesn't let anyone close apart from me."

Claire took Scarlet from under her arm and handed her to Kamito.

Scarlet shrank into a ball then stayed obediently in Kamito's arms.

"...Wow, so warm."

He felt a sense of warmth rise from within his body.

"Meow—, meow—♪"

The hell cat spirit seemed to be meowing very happily.

"...Tsk, w-why is Scarlet acting so intimate!?"

"K-Kamito, that's so unfair! I want a hug too!"

As soon as Ellis reached over, Scarlet began to struggle as though greatly repulsed.

"Kamito-kun, this kind of skin to skin contact would be even warmer."

Boing boing boing.

"Fianna!?"

"W-What, w-what are you doing, pervert princess!?"

At this moment, there was sudden gust of wind, causing the girls' hair to fly at the same time.

"W-What!?"

From under the precipice, a massive object rose up.

Bathed under the moonlight, the object appearing out of the darkness was—

"The latest model of the «Winged Raptor»-class combat craft!"

Claire cried out with surprise.

The streamlined craft was shaped like a flying dragon. The ship's body was plated with mithril. The wings on both sides gave off faint light.

Kamito recalled that this was one of the twelve small-sized flying ships owned by the Empire.

At this moment, the control room's door opened and Greyworth appeared on the deck.

"Just use this. However, absolutely do not break it."

"To think you were able to get authorization to use a flying ship in such short time!?"

Beneath the roaring wind, Kamito yelled.

Apart from those reserved for the imperial family, all flying ships were under the Fahrengart family's administration. Without the Knights' authorization, mobilizing a flying ship should be impossible.

"Who do you think I am? I've got plenty of blackmail material to threaten the military with."

"That explains why your life is always being targeted."

"When the time comes, lad, you'll protect me, right?"

"...As if."

Kamito turned his gaze away.

"Hurry and come up, there's not much time left."

Urged by Greyworth, Claire and the others jumped off the precipice and onto the deck.

"Okay, let's hurry—"

"W-Wait a sec... Kyah!"

As Fianna hesitated, Kamito picked her up in his arms and jumped over together.

"K-Kamito-kun, you're really..."

Landing on the deck, Fianna muttered with her face red.

"Given this ship, it should be able to catch up to the Theocracy's older style flying ship."

"Yes. After all, it is the latest and most advanced flying ship that my grandfather purchased."

Ellis expressed agreement with Greyworth. The Alphas Theocracy did not have the latest model of flying ships. At most, it would be an old-style craft from the Ranbal War era, supplied by «Murders».

Greyworth got off the flying ship and looked back at Kamito's group.

"This is all I can do. You guys will control it from here on."

"You can't find a pilot?"

"It's already the middle of the night, of course it can't be arranged. It is able to hover like this in the surroundings of «Ragna Ys» where the ether density is high, but if you want to accelerate, you need to activate the «Spirit Mechanism» that uses a wind spirit crystal as its core. Ellis, can you manage it?"

"Y-Yes!"

Ellis immediately straightened her posture and nodded.

"Who will pilot it?"

Even though he was trained in the «Instructional School», Kamito had never learned the skills for controlling a flying ship.

(On the other hand, specialized in espionage, Lily does have that type of skill—)

"At least, I've driven the imperial family's mini-craft before."

Fianna looked towards the control room and said quietly.

The control room's center was outfitted with a black slab of stone that had spirit language carved on it.

It looked like a stone panel that responded to touch and was controlled by thoughts.

"The basic controls are similar. As an outstanding princess maiden, you should not find it hard to control."

Greyworth's voice was heard from outside.

"I will stay on deck with Scarlet to guard against spirits. Rinslet, please prepare some midnight snacks. There should be a simple kitchen on a mini-craft."

"Understood!"

"What should I do?"

"Uh, Kamito should..."

Claire pondered for a while—

"Anyway, getting some sleep before we arrive would be nice, right?"

...Nothing he could contribute.

Oh well, it was true that there was nothing else he could do.

"Who knows the «Abandoned City»'s location?"

"The darkness spirit over there should know, right?"

"...Still the same, you don't know your manners, «Dusk Witch»."

The demon sword of darkness transformed into a girl in a dress the color of night.

Her beautiful black wings spread open and fluttered in the night sky.

"Restia!"

"...Fine. I shall lead the way until we reach the «Abandoned City». Be grateful to me."

"Darkness spirit, I don't trust you. Don't tell me you've forgotten everything you did back at the Academy."

Claire glared at Restia overhead.

"It matters not to me, if you know a safe route as humans. Once you enter the territory of archdemon-class spirits, this ship will be turned into sawdust."

"...!"

"Claire, it's okay. Believe in my partner."

"...Sigh, I know."

Claire shrugged.

Then lighting a small flame, she handed it over to Restia.

"...What's this?"

Restia inclined her head in puzzlement.

"You can't use light-attribute magic, right? It's hard to see you in the dark, so use this as a signal lamp."

"Ah yes, I see. How inconvenient it is to be human."

Understanding, Restia caught the fireball.

"Very well, let's go. To protect Iseria."

Part 3

"...As expected of the latest combat craft model. It's like a wind spirit."

The sound of the wind rumbled. Looking outside the window in the cabin, Kamito muttered.

A wind barrier was erected around the ship's body and kept slicing through the clouds. Down in the engine room, Ellis must be working quite hard.

"...But to think I would be asked to go sleep."

Kamito muttered to himself.

Although there was some remaining fatigue accumulated from the final round, Kamito did not feel at ease leaving everything to the girls and going to sleep by himself.

"Oh well, if I try to help, I'll just end up getting in the way..."

Kamito lay down on his side on the bed.

At this moment, he felt a hard object in his pocket.

"...Speaking of which, I should pass it along."

Kamito recalled.

It was the pendant from Claire's older sister.

The pendant carved with the House of Elstein's crest, the flame lion.

Even after plunging into her hellish path, Rubia still held on to this object.

Kamito got up from bed.

Walking in the corridor, he was about to take the stairs up to the deck—

...Unable to resist, he halted in his steps.

A wonderful aroma was drifting through the kitchen door's gap.

(...Rinslet's making midnight snacks, right?)

His stomach began to growl. Thinking back, he had not eaten since morning.

Following the aroma, he pushed the kitchen door open.

"...Kamito, what's the matter?"

Dressed in an apron, Rinslet turned around with a spoon in hand.

Kamito could see a pot bubbling on top of a fire spirit crystal. Looks like the aroma came from this pot of soup.

"I'm hungry. Smelling this aroma, I couldn't help but come here."

"...I see. Please be patient for a while."

Rinslet served the steaming soup into a bowl.

"This soup is made from bacon and potatoes. Those are all the ingredients I could find in storage."

"No, that's enough. It looks very tasty."

Kamito took a sip of soup.

"...Ahhh, delicious."

The delicious taste felt as though steam was rising from the bottom of his heart.

"The saltiness is just right."

"I-If you don't mind this type of crude cooking, I can make as much as you want."

Blushing, Rinslet kept twirling her hair in her finger.

Kamito finished the soup in one breath.

"Thanks for the meal... Thank you."

"You're going back to the room?"

"No, I still want to check out the deck."

Just as he was about to exit the kitchen—

"Uh, umm..."

"...Rinslet?"

Kamito's uniform sleeve was grabbed from behind.

...No, rather than grabbed, it felt more like it was held between fingers.

"U-Umm..."

Rinslet's head was bowed, looking very indecisive.

"C-Could you hold... my hand?"

Finally, she spoke quietly.

Gazing up at Kamito, her emerald eyes seemed to be wavering.

Her right hand had lost the «Spirit Seal». Her fingers were trembling.

One could hardly blame her. Despite acting full of vigor in front of everyone—

She was actually still very ill at ease.

...Kamito silently held her hand. He held her frail, delicate and feminine fingers.

"Fenrir will be taken back for sure. Don't worry."

"...Yes."

With Kamito holding her hand, Rinslet nodded.

Part 4

As soon as he walked outside the cabin, it felt cold as expected.

While shivering, Kamito looked for signs of Claire.

She was sitting on the deck, hugging Scarlet.

"Claire—"

Walking up the stairs, he called out.

"Uwah... K-Kamito!?"

Startled, she turned her head back.

"Go back down and sleep. You must be tired."

"I can't fall asleep. Here, I've brought you some of Rinslet's soup."

Kamito placed the steaming soup on the floor.

"Th-Thank you..."

"Can I sit beside you?"

"...Eh? Ah, y-yeah..."

Kamito bent over and sat down by Claire's side.

...An awkward silence descended.

After all, too many things had happened during the final round.

Both of them were searching for a suitable topic of conversation—

"It's great that you were able to get back your darkness spirit."

Claire ended up the first to speak.

While gazing at the bright light in the distant clouds ahead, she murmured.

Despite being out of view, mixed into the darkness, Restia was there, acting as the flying ship's guide.

"...Yeah. That's why I've journeyed nonstop for the past three years."

"I see..."

Claire began to pout and sulk a bit.

"Umm, what a shame... You finally saw her again."

"...Yes. It's wonderful to see Nee-sama again, but hearing that kind of thing—"

"You mean the «Elemental Lords»' madness?"

"Yeah. It's hard to believe, but..."

Worrying, Claire embraced Scarlet tighter.

"The reason why Nee-sama rebelled was because the elemental lord wanted me as a sacrifice..."

"...Indeed, that's very disturbing."

The «Fire Elemental Lord» had demanded the user of Elstein's flame, Claire, as a sacrifice.

The «Flame-burning Flames» that transcended the rules and logic of this world.

Why did the «Elemental Lord» demand that sort of thing—

"Next, what should we do? Continue searching for Rubia?"

"...Right."

Claire murmured with a pained expression.

She still had not organized her thoughts.

The «Blade Dance»'s winners' blood relatives would receive a special pardon. This was customary since antiquity. However, even if Claire begged, it was unlikely that the Empire would let Rubia Elstein off.

Betraying the «Elemental Lord» was an unforgivable crime.

(—Besides, Rubia's grievances cannot be disclosed to the public.)

Although few would believe it, if news spread of the «Elemental Lords» being corrupted by something unidentified and even going mad, surely a great commotion would result.

"Oh yeah, this thing—"

Kamito took out the pendant from his pocket.

"...The lion's crest! Kamito, why do you—"

"Rubia entrusted it to me. To give to you."

He handed the pendant over. Claire held it tightly.

"...So warm. This chain is infused with the power of flames."

She stared at the pendant with gentle eyes.

The side view of her face was causing Kamito's heart to race.

"...However, why did Nee-sama give this to me?"

"At the time, she probably intended for you to inherit it upon her death."

"How..."

"...Don't worry. Your sister is very tenacious. Just like you."

Kamito placed his hand on her head.

"Y-Yes... Nee-sama has great mental strength."

Claire nodded lightly.

"That thing, just return it the next time you see her."

"Yeah..."

After putting the pendant away safely...

Claire looked up—

"B-By the way..."

Coughing once, she leaned closer to Kamito.

"Hmm?"

"—Kamito, you're the real «Ren Ashbell», right?"

"Guh..."

...He was totally caught off guard.

"U-Umm... Uh..."

"Save it. You're wasting your breath if you want to keep hiding it. You've already admitted it yourself."

"I-I wasn't trying to hide it... okay..."

Kamito turned his gaze away and scratched his head.

"...So, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Claire glared at him.

"...Uh, sorry for deceiving you."

Kamito apologized honestly.

"Hmph, you've been deceiving me all this time?"

"Ugh..."

"—Before, I had always admired her."

"...S-Sorry."

Putting his hands to the ground, Kamito bowed his head and apologized.

Seeing that—

"...Sigh, fine. Okay, look up now."

Claire sighed and then—

"...Umm, thanks."

"Huh?"

Hearing unexpected words from Claire, Kamito frowned.

Claire relaxed the corners of her mouth slightly and said:

"Uh, I already mentioned it before... Three years ago, what saved me after I had given up on everything was her blade dance I saw back then. If it

weren't for Ren Ashbell, I surely would not have made the «Blade Dance» my goal... So, thank you."

"Claire..."

"I-It feels a bit embarrassing, like this..."

"O-Oh..."

Blushing, both of them averted their gaze.

"...B-By the way, are you going to tell Ellis and the others?"

"...No, let's wait first..."

"I see..."

Claire chuckled and smiled, pressing her index finger lightly to her cherry lips.

"Very well, I will keep your secret. —A secret between two people."

Her smiling face was so charming that Kamito could not help but stare, mesmerized.

Chapter 7 - Seal-Breaking Ritual

Part 1

After setting off from «Ragna Ys», several hours elapsed.

The flying ship «Winged Raptor» arrived above the Abandoned City.

"It feels quite different, looking at the city from above."

Looking out the window in the control room, Kamito muttered to himself.

The ruins were covered by dense forest. Relying on just moonlight, nothing could be seen at all.

But mere hours earlier, Kamito's group was still blade dancing in this place.

"I remember that the entrance to the underground ruins is located in the Abandoned City's central zone."

"It's quite hard to locate from above."

Controlling the stone tablet, Fianna sighed.

"I think it's roughly there. Look, where the flames are burning intensely."

Claire pointed diagonally forward.

Kamito turned his gaze to find flames burning in a radial pattern over there.

"Right. That's where Muir's demon flame spirit, Valaraukar, was rampaging."

The flames shot out in the Abandoned City's central zone were still burning intensely even now.

"I can't find any signs of the Theocracy's combat craft. Maybe we passed it along the way?"

"With such poor visibility, it's too difficult to find them. Fianna, could you land over there where it's relatively wide open?"

"I'll try."

Fianna nodded and traced her finger on the stone tablet's surface.

The flying ship then changed direction and slowly landed in the Abandoned City's central zone.

Part 2

The entrance to the underground ruins was inside a shrine where debris was scattered everywhere.

During the battle against Muir's «Valaraukar», that was where Rinslet had emerged.

"Ghosts of the «Abandoned City», rest in peace—«Hell Blast»!"

The large swarms of «Forsaken Spirits» that seemed to be guarding the place were wiped out by Restia's wide-area annihilation magic.

The shadow-like «Forsaken Spirits» instantly vanished into space.

"...Completely merciless."

Hearing Kamito's muttering...

"Those used to be heroes in the past Spirit War. Rather than let them live forever in resentment like that, viciously burying them in this manner would be proper mercy."

Restia lightly closed her dusk-colored eyes.

"So, Kamito—"

"Hmm?"

"If I were to turn into that, please likewise—"

"...Restia, please spare me the unfunny jokes."

Saying that, Kamito wielding the shining sacred sword and started down the stairs that led underground.

"We better hurry. The releasing ritual takes time."

"Also, I'm worried about those two who are staying on the ship."

"Yeah, that's right."

With Kamito in the lead, Fianna and Rinslet followed.

Claire and Ellis had stayed above ground because the flying ship was at risk of being taken away once the Theocracy discovered it. On the other hand, Fianna was needed for the «Seal-Breaking Ritual» while Rinslet was needed to summon the girl spirit, so they went on the expedition.

Kamito was their bodyguard.

Assuming Sjora Kahn had discovered Iseria's existence through «Fenrir»'s memories, she had likely invaded the underground ruins already.

"This set of ruins is a tomb for spirits."

Fianna touched the surface of the stone wall as she whispered.

"Carved here are the true names of the spirits who had fought in the «Spirit War»."

Restia halted in her steps and nodded in agreement.

The Spirit War.

Far in the distant past, during times immemorial, the «Darkness Elemental Lord», Ren Ashdoll, had rebelled against the «Five Great Elemental Lords», thus causing a war—That was what everyone said.

"Restia, were you in «Ren Ashdoll»'s army?"

Kamito looked back and asked.

"Yes. In the past, I held the position of leading the army. I also fought that «Scarlet Valkyrie» many times on the battlefield in the past."

In a rare moment, Restia was murmuring with a pained expression.

...She apparently did not quite want to recall those memories.

"Speaking of which, Restia, you were the one who told Claire about Scarlet's true name."

"Despite my reluctance, it was the only solution at the time. Claire Rouge is not supposed to be able to use that hell cat yet."

"I see..."

Kamito starting walking again.

"I remember that Est was also a spirit weapon—"

In the mean time, he used the sacred sword's glow for illuminating the depths of the road ahead.

"Have you two ever met before?"

"In direct battle, not even once."

Surprisingly, Restia shook her head.

"By her own arbitrary decision, she did not belong to any faction. Both factions of the «Elemental Lords» and «Ren Ashdoll» feared the strongest sword spirit. Since the current Miss Sacred Sword did not inherit her memories and power from that time, I could still joke around with her, but to be honest, I would not want to enter a conflict with her original form."

"...Hold on. From what I know, the current Est is already a spirit of the strongest class."

"I have no objections to that statement."

Restia shrugged.

"But don't forget that the sacred sword in your hand is the existence that even the «Elemental Lords» feared. And that same power is cursing and eating away at you."

"...!"

Kamito suddenly gasped—

His gaze landed on the shining «Demon Slayer».

(...Come to think of it, I haven't considered that.)

The legendary sacred sword had vanquished Demon King Solomon in the past.

However, its true form was the cursed demon sword that had taken the «Sacred Queen»'s life.

Although Kamito had considered using the «Elemental Lords»' miraculous power, which was granted to «Blade Dance» winners, to lift that curse, however—

(...I can't possibly let that darkness touch Est.)

Lifting Est's curse required coming up with another solution.

While pondering this, Kamito continued advancing through the passage. Shortly after.

The group reached a giant cavern where many passageways branched off.

"I think this place is fine."

"True. With this much space, performing the «Seal-Breaking Ritual» won't be a problem."

Hearing Rinslet's whispers, Fianna agreed.

"Got it."

Kamito stabbed the sacred sword's blade into the ground and the dazzling light illuminated the surroundings.

"Respond to the summons of your lord, come forth—«Georgios»!"

Fianna chanted the words for summoning and called forth the knight spirit.

The knight spirit opened up its breastplate. Accompanied by rattling metallic noises, Fianna took out all kinds of cooking equipment.

"This is okay?"

"Yes. With this, I can make a hundred or two without any problem."

Rinslet held a frying pan in one hand with a fire spirit crystal and went to work with great enthusiasm.

Soon, she added butter to the heated pan.

An appetizing sound of sizzling could be heard in the cavern.

"Say, Kamito, what is she doing?"

Restia asked, rather intrigued.

"Yeah, it's for summoning the spirit from last time."

"...Huh?"

She was instantly taken aback.

This expression was quite rare for her.

"How exactly did you come up with this? How could that actually be possible?"

"Well, I also thought the same originally."

The summoning of high ranking spirits required grand rituals taking place over multiple days. This was common sense.

Using pancakes to successfully summon a high ranking spirit was completely unprecedented.

"I also received quite a shock the first time I witnessed it. I felt as though all the basic knowledge and values I learned at the «Divine Ritual Institute» were uprooted outright."

"Oh well, I'm thinking it's just this spirit that's a bit special..."

Hearing Fianna's astounded murmurings, Kamito smiled wryly.

"...Impossible to believe."

Restia was not wholly convinced.

Soon, the aroma of melted butter wafted out.

"Fufu, cooked to perfection."

Rinslet placed the fried pancake onto a plate.

Steaming hot. With honey dripped on top, it looked very delicious.

"Can I try some?"

"Of course. I will be making many more of them. Please, you too, Miss Darkness Spirit."

"...Given this rare chance, I thank you for your hospitality."

Restia adjusted her skirt hem and sat down beside Kamito.

Gracefully, she sliced the pancake into small pieces and placed one in her mouth.

"...!"

Instantly, her eyes opened wide.

...Bite. Munch munch.

Very quickly, she began to eat without saying a word.

"That's the same reaction as when Est ate beancurd for the first time."

Kamito teased.

"H-How unbecoming..."

Restia coughed and turned her gaze away.

Suddenly, her gaze settled on a spot in the darkness.

"..."

"Restia, what's the matter?"

Kamito frowned and followed her gaze—

"...!"

At the fork ahead, a few trembling strands of hair could be seen.

"C-Could that be..."

"It's Miss Spirit!"

Rinslet stood up and hastily rushed over.

"An «Elemental Lord» really was summoned using pancakes..."

Restia trembled as she remarked.

Part 3

...Nom nom nom.

Dressed in a priestess outfit, the girl spirit was happily enjoying the pancakes.

"Rinslet's cakes, so tasty."

"Fufu, eat to your heart's content."

By her side, Rinslet proceeded to make more pancakes for refills.

Looking at the two of them—

(...Indeed, this child is the one.)

Kamito muttered in his mind.

Hair the color of shimmering water with flat bangs. Eyes as clear as lake water.

This appearance was undoubtedly that of the girl whom Kamito had liberated in his past memories.

The Water Elemental Lord—«Iseria Seaward».

That face in his memory was exactly the same as the appearance of this girl right here.

Her testimony about being summoned to this place three years ago in a state of amnesia also matched Kamito's memories.

She was transferred to this «Abandoned City» the day that Kamito had failed to assassinate the elemental lords.

However—

(...It's hard to believe. To think this child is an «Elemental Lord».)

Kamito was still half-convinced.

He drew close to Restia's ear beside him and whispered:

"Say, is this child really the «Water Elemental Lord»?"

"Yeah, absolutely no mistake about it."

Restia nodded readily.

"...I see."

Kamito nodded and went over to Fianna's side.

Fianna had already changed into official ritual attire and was preparing the ritual.

She lit a candlestick and drew a giant magic circle on the floor.

"The ritual can start soon?"

"Just hold on a bit. The leyline here is not very stable."

Fianna carved seals on the ground as she answered.

"...If only Est could be used, that'd be so much easier."

Placing his hand on the «Demon Slayer»'s hilt, Kamito muttered.

Although «Terminus Est» possessed the highest level of spell-lifting properties, when it came to releasing an entire barrier, it could not be complimented for its ease of use.

In order to release an isolation barrier, the carved seal serving as the core of the magic needed to be located and destroyed.

Very likely, there was a core somewhere in these underground ruins—

However, finding it in these ruins would be virtually impossible.

"...Sorry. Could you please wait a while longer."

"I've been waiting here for three years. I'm already used to waiting."

The girl nodded.

"Also, I never expected you guys to return so soon."

"Yeah. Actually, someone is targeting you."

"Targeting me... Could it be those people just now?"

The girl spirit reacted.

"You know something?"

"There were quite a few armed humans who entered these underground ruins. Some of them seemed to be capable of employing spirits."

"...Those are Sjora Kahn's subordinates. They came for you."

The girl spirit sighed.

"They probably plan to capture me to use as a militarized spirit. But unfortunately, even though I have human form, I do not possess a high ranking spirit's power."

(...Not only her memories but even her power as an «Elemental Lord» were lost after all?)

Was her power currently being restrained by the barrier or did she lose almost all her power when she was liberated from that horrendous darkness?

"...In any case, we better hurry. This place might be found."

Saying that, Kamito focused his attention on the darkness.

Part 4

—A few minutes later, Fianna had finished her magic circle in the cavern.

The candlestick's flame burned intensely while the pattern drawn on the ground glowed faintly.

The girl spirit in the priestess garb was standing in the center of the pattern.

"I just need to wait here?"

"Yes. In the next part, you might feel some strain, so please endure it."

Fianna waited on the girl spirit. Dressed in the top-class ritual attire, the imperial princess was exuding a sacred aura that Kamito never would have imagined in the past.

(...She really is a princess maiden who was the «Queen» candidate.)

"Kamito-kun, you're not thinking something impertinent, are you?"

Fianna glared at Kamito.

"Also, Kamito-kun, is it really true? This spirit is—"

"Yes. I was half-skeptical at first, but there's definitely no mistake."

The one who answered was Restia rather than Kamito.

"That child is the «Water Elemental Lord»'s incarnation that was separated."

—After the ritual's preparations were complete, Kamito had revealed the girl spirit's true identity.

Namely, she was the incarnation of the «Water Elemental Lord»—Iseria Seaward.

Of course, he did not mention the assassination plan from three years ago.

"...Extremely difficult to believe that this child is really the «Water Elemental Lord»."

"Yes, the same goes for me..."

Unsettled, the girl held Rinslet's hand.

Upon hearing about her true identity, she seemed to be the one in the most shock.

"Darkness spirit, you're not trying to scheme against us, are you?"

"Oh dear, what purpose would that serve? In any case, everything will become clear once that child is unsealed."

Restia effortlessly deflected Fianna's questioning.

"If the true name turns out to be mistaken, the unsealing will fail."

"Let's believe Restia for now, Fianna. This child's existence might prove to be the key to understanding the mystery of the «Elemental Lords»' madness that Rubia mentioned."

Kamito interrupted.

"...I understand. Seeing as Kamito-kun says so."

Hearing him, Fianna nodded reluctantly.

Holding her palms together, she turned to face the girl spirit.

"Iseria-sama, once the ritual begins, it cannot be stopped midway. May I ask if it is okay?"

"...Understood."

She nodded.

"Kamito, all of you should keep your distance until the ritual ends."

"Yeah, got it."

Pulling the «Demon Slayer» out from the ground, Kamito retreated to the walls of the cavern.

Fianna slowly stood up—

"—You, Iseria Seaward, shall be liberated from here."

She declared in a clear and pure voice.

The altars at the four corners gave off intense light.

Sparks burst forth from the giant magic circle, piercing Iseria's entire body.

"...! A-Ah, ahhhhhhhhhh!"

Screaming as though she were struggling, the girl clutched her head with both hands and knelt down in pain.

"Miss Spirit!"

"...Did the ritual fail!?"

Rinslet and Kamito could not suppress the urge to rush over—

"No, Kamito—"

But Restia reached out to stop them.

"That is the strain from releasing the seal. It is evidence that the «Seal-Breaking Ritual» is succeeding... That princess over there really lives up to her position as a former «Queen» candidate."

"...O-Ooh... Head... hurts... so much..."

Confronted with the rushing flow of light piercing her, the girl spirit desperately endured.

Her petite body began to tremble slightly.

"...So scary... darkness... is... swallowing... me..."

"...Darkness?"

Hearing the girl's murmurs, Kamito suddenly reacted.

"Could it be that she's remembering her past memories...?"

"Yes, that seems to be the case."

Restia concurred.

—Just at this moment.

"—Heh, well isn't this interesting?"

"...!?"

A voice was heard in the darkness.

Kamito turned his head back—

Only to see the Theocracy's witch, her bright red lips twisted in a sneer.

Part 5

"Sjora Kahn...!"

"—An amazing coincidence. To think I would run into you here in a place like this."

The Theocracy's witch giggled and walked out of the darkness.

"But regrettably, my target is that spirit. I don't have time to play with you."

"...Is that so?"

Kamito readied the «Demon Slayer».

"What happened to «Fenrir»?"

Kamito demanded with murderous intent.

"—Fufu, if you're asking about that demon wolf, it's right here."

Sjora sneered and chanted a summoning incantation.

Instantly, a blizzard blew in the cavern and a giant wolf appeared out of thin air.

"...!"

But despite resembling «Fenrir»'s appearance, there were decisive differences.

The snow-white fur had turned pitch black and its eyes were bright red like blood.

The demon ice spirit's noble bearing was completely lost, exuding an ominous aura from its entire body.

"Fenrir...!"

"Wait, Rinslet—"

Kamito frantically caught Rinslet by the hand before she could rush over.

"Kamito-san...!"

(...They have seven or eight elementalists?)

Kamito calmly counted the enemies lurking in the darkness.

Sjora Kahn's combat strength was already known, Although she was feared as a demon caster within the Theocracy, what she specialized in was summoning magic. She did not seem to be used to blade dancing with elemental waffen.

Her prowess was far inferior to top elementalists like Muir or Leonora.

(...The problem lies in her subordinates. There's quite a number of them.)

White masks appeared in the darkness. All of them were dressed in crimson military uniforms.

If they were elementalists belonging to the military, their strength should surpass a certain threshold. He could not act recklessly.

While staying alert of Sjora before him, Kamito turned his gaze towards the back.

The «Seal-Breaking Ritual» continued. Unperturbed by the change in situation, Fianna was focused on offering prayers with her eyes closed.

(...Nothing less from the imperial princess. Calm and composed despite the crisis.)

Kamito curled his tongue.

She trusted in Kamito's group and focused on her own mission.

Iseria was inside the magic circle, appearing to be in great suffering.

"Rinslet, go over to Iseria's side."

"...I-I understand."

Even though she glared at Sjora, Rinslet obediently followed his directions.

"Kamito-san, please... «Fenrir»—"

"Yeah, I know."

Kamito nodded.

"Restia—"

He called out behind him. The darkness spirit girl proceeded to hold Kamito's hand.

"—I am your sword. Your wish is my command."

Accompanied by the sound of her pure voice, the «Vorpal Sword» formed itself in Kamito's hand.

—Please don't copy me, darkness spirit.

—Oh dear, Kamito won't like you if you're too petty.

Immediately, the two voices sounded in his mind.

"...I already told you not to argue, right?"

Groaning, Kamito infused his dual swords with divine power.

Holding both swords in a reverse grip, he instantly converted them into small-sized daggers.

Although the power was less per hit, this was more flexible and nimble in a group battle.

"...Using two spirits at once. As expected of the «Demon King»'s successor."

Sjora Kahn smiled with delight.

(...Her tone of voice changed?)

Suddenly, Kamito felt his hair stand on end.

Kamito had heard from Ellis and Rinslet about Sjora Kahn's subtle change.

Back when the battle was in full swing, she suddenly seemed as though she were a different person—

(Indeed, there's something different about the witch compared to before...)

"Although this might be overkill for the sake of targeting one spirit—"

Sjora extended her hand.

"Bringing these girls here turned out to be the right decision."

Instantly, the masked girls advanced with perfect discipline.

"—Master, please issue your orders."

The military uniformed girls spoke in unison.

"Capture the spirit. It's fine to kill the rest. However, do not damage Kazehaya Kamito's body. It belongs to me."

"Affirmative—"

The girls drew their weapons. The blades glowed faintly. They were mithril daggers.

(Those weapons... Are not used by knights. They're assassins!?)

Instantly, the air shook. Kamito could sense it through his skin.

The girls attacked, their breathing in unison—no, there were slight discrepancies in timing.

(...These movements, could they be—!?)

Kamito instantly noticed.

The attack trajectories were unpredictable for ordinary people. These three-dimensional movement skills, treating the walls of the cavern as no different from flat ground, belonged to assassins originating from the «Instructional School».

Within the blink of an eye, some of them had circled behind him to surround him from all sides. The naked blades shone in the darkness. Bound to the mithril daggers, steel wires were entangling Kamito's arms and legs.

(...The formation of absolute death!)

This was part of the «Instructional School»'s group tactics. This was a technique developed to allow assassins who were not elementalists to defeat powerful spirit knights. Once tightened completely, Kamito's four limbs were going to be sliced to pieces before he could resist—

(...Don't underestimate me!)

Kamito poured divine power into the «Vorpal Sword».

The pitch-black lightning exploded and traveled to the masked girls along the steel wires.

This was an application of the «Vorpal Blast»—his prided technique as the «Strongest Blade Dancer», Ren Ashbell.

(...Only two of them were taken out. Unexpectedly few.)

Kamito counted the number of disappeared presences.

The others had apparently released the steel wires at the last instant. They looked quite highly trained.

With both of his arms free now, Kamito readied his dual swords—

"...Who could have thought that the Theocracy's princess would be rearing assassins from the «Instructional School»."

Kamito yelled out at Sjora in the passage.

"This group was Rubia Elstein's private army."

The witch shrugged and said:

"That woman took in the «Instructional School»'s orphans to serve as her subordinates. I simply interfered and reeducated them to become the cult's elite troops."

"...So Rubia was being used by the Theocracy as well."

Muttering, Kamito took a step forward.

(...Six of them remain.)

These assassins' average ability was roughly the same as the nobles studying at the Academy.

However, they were experts in killing elementalists.

They were highly proficient in ways to neutralize elementalists.

Possibly, they might even include cursed armament seal test subjects like Jio Inzagi or people with inborn special powers like Muir Alenstarl... They could not be underestimated.

However—

"...I'm not gonna let you harm a single hair of my companions."

"Now that's the «Demon King» I hoped for."

Sjora snapped her fingers

The pitch-black demon wolf blew an astounding blizzard.

Part 6

The howling blizzard blew inside the cavern.

Staying by Iseria's side as she endured the pain inside the magic circle, Rinslet clenched her fist tight.

On the other side of the blizzard, she could hear the noise of a beast's roars and weapons clashing.

"Kamito-san...!"

As much as she wanted to rush over, her footsteps faltered.

With her contracted spirit currently lost, Rinslet was nothing more than a powerless girl.

(...I must act stronger. I am the eldest Laurenfrost daughter after all!)

Iseria was trying her best beside Rinslet.

Rinslet could not allow herself to display worry.

In spite of that—

(Fenrir... I beg you... please listen to me!)

The gentle demon ice spirit was baring its fangs and claws at Kamito.

This reality was making Rinslet suffer with heart wrenching pain.

Just at this moment...

She felt someone tug her sleeve.

"...Miss Spirit?"

She suddenly looked back.

...Only to find Iseria reaching out from the center of the magic circle.

"...Rinslet, please. Hold... my... hand..."

While enduring the pain, she squeezed out her words in a moaning voice.

"I-I understand!"

Rinslet swiftly held Iseria's hand.

"Umm, are you okay?"

"Yes... I've begun to recall... memories about myself, a little..."

She spoke while holding Rinslet's hand as hard as she could.

"...I am... the one ruling over the element of water... So... I shall slightly, give you, a bit of power..."

"...Huh?"

Instantly, faint light glowed from Rinslet's right hand.

This was the light of spirit magic, a spirit's strength drawn out by divine power.

"...What on earth happened—"

Rinslet's eyes of jasper opened wide.

Extraordinary divine power was pouring into her through Iseria's tiny hand.

"This is—!"

"Use my power... to... help, him—"

Part 7

(This is trickier than imagined—)

Kamito used his dual swords to deflect the numerous steel wires released inside the blizzard.

Fenrir's claws attacked while his view was obscured. The howling wind numbed his hearing and the cold air was gradually sapping Kamito's stamina.

(...I'm reaching my limit in dodging through sensing their presences alone.)

Using the demon sword's blade, he parried the shining claws of ice—

Kamito pulled back from the berserk demon ice spirit.

Simply in terms of defeating it, there were quite a number of opportunities.

However, the opponent was «Fenrir». If he used the wrong level of strength, he might kill it.

(The «Spirit Seal» carved by the demon spirit should be somewhere—)

He just needed to destroy it using the «Demon Slayer».

However, he still could not find a remotely plausible target.

As soon as he exited the range of the blizzard, daggers would immediately flit across his face.

The «Instructional School»'s assassins ambushed Kamito as they continually changed their positions.

ROOOAAAR!

Fenrir's figure suddenly appeared inside the blizzard.

Its giant jaws opened wide before him, releasing cold breath—

(Crap—)

Just at that moment—

Kamito noticed.

(...It's over there!)

At the same time, he sensed presences behind him.

The assassin's magic mithril daggers were nearing his neck.

"...!"

Just as the icy blades touched his neck, in that instant—

"Imprison my enemies in an eternal curse of ice, until the time of judgment—«Ice Forest»!"

The stern voice shook the air.

Out from the ground, vines of cursed ice turned the assassins surrounding Kamito into ice sculptures.

This was high-level spirit magic for incapacitating multiple targets.

(...Could it actually be Rinslet?)

In a state with her contracted spirit lost, she could not possibly perform this level of spirit magic.

But the voice he heard was unmistakably hers.

Just as the killing intent disappeared behind him—

"If you want to eat my arm, here you go—"

Kamito inserted his right arm into Fenrir's mouth.

Next—

"—I'm relying on you, Est!"

He poured all his divine power into the «Demon Slayer».

In the next instant, a flash erupted and the demon ice spirit's entire body was enveloped in light.

Indeed, the cursed «Spirit Seal» was carved right on the demon wolf's tongue.

The instant Fenrir opened its huge jaws, Kamito pierced the seal.

The howling blizzard subsided and the cavern's interior returned to silence.

"...Do you still want to continue? Sjora Kahn."

Pulling out the «Demon Slayer» from the motionlessly standing «Fenrir»—

Kamito turned his gaze towards the Theocracy's witch.

"..."

There were three subordinates of the «Instructional School» remaining. Although Sjora had not summoned her demon spirit, «Bandersnatch», so long as he stayed wary of her power to steal spirits, there was nothing to fear.

"So be it. Using this body, I have no chance of winning."

Sjora was unexpectedly up front.

She made a gesture to her subordinates.

Once they had swiftly taken away their collapsed companions and disappeared into the darkness, the witch turned towards Kamito again.

"—See you next time. The other «Demon King»."

Then just as Kamito was thinking she was going to chant some kind of spell—

Sjora vanished into thin air.

Part 8

"—Fenrir!"

Rushing over, Rinslet hugged «Fenrir»'s giant body.

"...Thank goodness... Finally, you've returned."

Tears appeared in her eyes of jasper.

She buried her face into the snow-white fur and cried.

Fenrir licked Rinslet's face with his wide tongue.

"...S-So ticklish, seriously..."

"—This is wonderful, Rinslet."

Kamito called out.

"I-It's all thanks to you, Kamito-san!"

This time, Rinslet hugged Kamito.



"...! R-Rinslet...!"

Soft.

A girl's fragrance.

The soft sensation of a bosom was making his heart race.

—At this moment.

"Things have finished on this side as well, Kamito-kun."

Kamito suddenly looked over.

Only to see in the center of the magic circle—

The girl was standing quietly.

"Iseria... Did your memories return?"

The girl nodded politely.

"Yes. I am the «Water Elemental Lord»—Iseria Seaward."

Solemnly, she announced her name.

Chapter 8 - The Freed Elemental Lord

Part 1

After bringing Iseria out from the underground ruins, Kamito's group immediately made their way to the flying ship.

When they converged, Claire and Ellis seemed quite exhausted.

While Kamito's group was fighting Sjora Kahn's side underground, they had defended against ceaseless attacks from «Forsaken Spirits» above ground.

Even so, the two girls still succeeded in keeping the flying ship safe.

"...Sorry, we returned a bit late. Are you two okay?"

Seeing them collapsed on the deck, Kamito asked.

"Well, I suppose..."

"...I really want to take a hot water bath for a ritual purification."

They answered with exhausted smiles.

Although they did not seem to have suffered any major injuries, they looked quite tired. Scarlet was lying on the floor while Simorgh was resting by the ship in its demon bird form.

"I'll go prepare some nutritious food!"

Rinslet quickly rushed towards the kitchen.

"I'll go get some healing crystals."

Fianna followed closely behind her.

"—The way it looks, we can't take off immediately huh."

Restia leaned against the railing and grumbled.

Indeed, asking Ellis to activate the wind spirit mechanism in her current condition would be pushing it.

"...Sorry, Kamito."

"Don't mind it. I'll stay on watch. You two should rest properly."

Holding the «Demon Slayer», Kamito looked down below the railing.

The Abandoned City's shadowy ghosts kept swarming under the ship.

"This will be quite tricky..."

At this moment.

"—All we need is to help those two recover their divine power, right?"

Emerging from the cabin, a girl spoke.

"Iseria?"

Everyone present was stunned.

Iseria walked over to Claire and Ellis, extending her hand lightly.

"—O water, heal the souls of pure maidens."

She chanted a short incantation.

Gentle light enveloped the two girls, healing their injuries within the blink of an eye.

"This is...!"

"Our divine power recovered!?"

Ellis and Claire stared in wide-eyed amazement.

Kamito also stared with his eyes wide open. Even Fianna's healing magic could not recover divine power rapidly. Yet this sort of thing was easily achieved by this girl.

"...I see. It appears that I can still use this level of magic as usual despite having lost my power."

Iseria murmured softly as though confirming her power.

She looked at Ellis' dumbfounded face.

"Have you recovered?"

"Yes. I can feel my body filled with divine power."

"Wonderful. Then let's start the flying ship—"

Iseria turned over to Kamito:

"—I have things to say to you all."

Part 2

"...Th-This child is the Water Elemental Lord!?"

The first to speak and cry out in astonishment was Claire.

In the ship's most spacious room, Kamito's group had gathered at a long table to hold a conference. On the table were snacks and tea that Rinslet had specially prepared, giving off an elegant fragrance.

"...We have no choice but to accept this."

Fianna sighed and nodded.

"The «Seal-Breaking Ritual» is ritual magic that involves unsealing a spirit's true name. This is Iseria Seaward-sama without a doubt."

The ship had already entered a stable course and did not require fine control.

Hence, since the driving mechanism's spirit crystal was successfully activated, Fianna and Ellis could temporarily join them in this gathering.

The task of staying vigilant of the surroundings was entrusted to Restia.

"H-However..."

Claire still found it difficult to believe.

The one in question, Iseria, stayed by Rinslet's side and drank tea.

Whenever she popped a snack in her mouth, her shimmering watery hair would quiver. She looked absolutely adorable.

She quietly put down her teacup.

"Despite being an «Elemental Lord», I am currently just a manifested avatar."

"Manifested avatar?"

"Yes. My memories are still incomplete while virtually all of my power resides in the main body. Although simple spirit magic can be used, it's a far cry from my original power."

"...Similar to the current Est."

Casting his gaze to the spirit seal on his right hand, Kamito muttered... That said, her power to instantly heal Claire and Ellis still surpassed ordinary spirits by far.

"...However, why were you sealed in that kind of place, Your Majesty the Elemental Lord?"

Ellis voiced her puzzlement.

"...I don't quite remember."

The girl shook her head.

"But three years ago, something definitely happened. Someone rescued the insane me, imprisoned in the darkness—"

"...!"

Kamito almost spurted tea from his mouth.

Iseria looked over at him with surprise.

Luckily, she did not seem to have noticed—

(The insane «Elemental Lords» huh...)

The existence that had swallowed Restia and contaminated the «Darkness Elemental Lord» Ren Ashdoll inside her.

—The «Darkness Beyond This World».

"That darkness made the «Elemental Lords» insane?"

"...Yes."

As Iseria nodded, her fingers trembled slightly.

"Nee-sama was speaking the truth..."

Claire murmured.

"But what is it actually? The darkness parasitizing the «Elemental Lords»—"

"—It is an otherwordly existence impossible to put into words."

"...Otherworld?"

Everyone present was shocked.

"Uh, umm, what..."

"Exactly as the words imply, a third realm that is neither the human world or «Astral Zero». Why this thing was summoned, and when and by whom, I do not know—"

"Neither the human world or «Astral Zero», a third..."

Completely absurd. The «Divine Ritual Institute» and the Spirit Investigation Association both denied the existence of other worlds.

However—

Kamito had seen that darkness with his own eyes.

The root source of the miraculous power granting all «Wishes».

The existence that devoured even the «Elemental Lords» ruling over «Astral Zero»—

"...Hard to believe. But even though it's hard to believe..."

Claire's lips trembled.

"But Nee-sama did call it «Something beyond this world»—"

"..."

The scene was plunged into silence. The truth recounted by the «Elemental Lord» herself had made everyone speechless.

Finally—

"...From this point, the main topic begins."

Iseria brought up a new topic.

The room instantly entered a tense state.

"I have one question for you all. Why do you think that this «Blade Dance» festival was held, continuing all this time, over the past few centuries?"

"...?"

Faced with this sudden question, Kamito's group looked at one another.

"Isn't it for pleasing the «Elemental Lords»?"

"Yes, but that is simply one side of the festival."

Saying that, Iseria shook her head.

"The «Blade Dance» is the system that we «Elemental Lords» devised to keep our madness in check. Over the past few centuries, only by using the miraculous power beyond this world, imparted upon humans, were we able to stabilize our minds—"

"A system to calm the «Elemental Lords»..."

Fianna murmured in shock.

"Whenever the darkness' corrosion deepened, we would inform the human realm to hold a «Blade Dance», hoping that one day, the darkness eating away at us could be completely purified. In fact, the system proved to be very effective—Until now."

"..."

The meaning of the «Blade Dance». This truth caused everyone to hold their breath.

The «Blade Dance» system was established several centuries ago.

—In other words, at least a few centuries earlier, the otherworldly darkness had already corrupted the «Elemental Lords», gradually sending their minds into disarray.

"Yes. The recent «Blade Dance» festivals failed to function completely. It is unknown whether it's due to a flaw in the original design or if it had been tampered with. But undoubtedly, it resulted in the «Elemental Lords» going out of control."

...This finally began to make sense.

Indeed, there were far too many irregularities in the latest «Blade Dance».

A mere three-year interval since the previous festival. The participation of a monster like Nepenthes Lore. Choosing the «Abandoned City» as the match grounds—

It all implied that the «Blade Dance» system was showing flaws.

"We can no longer count on the «Blade Dance» festival's purifying effects. If we «Elemental Lords» continue to be eaten away by the otherworldly darkness, we will surely destroy the world ourselves in the end. Whether this «Astral Zero» or the human realm—"

"How could this...!"

Claire could not help but stand up from her chair.

—The world's destruction.

Suddenly confronted with this kind of thing, no wonder she was unable to remain calm.

"In other words, the otherworldly darkness will destroy «Astral Zero»?"

Kamito had not expected the darkness itself to possess a will—

"It has nothing to do with the darkness' will. But our madness will eventually bring about destruction."

...Indeed, this was not idle talk.

There was the tragedy of Dylus which led to Rubia Elstein's betrayal.

If those kinds of incidents happened repeatedly—

"—So, I have one request."

Iseria brought it up slowly.

"Request?"

"In the meeting tomorrow, you all will have a chance to have a direct audience with the «Elemental Lords»."

(Could it be...!)

Kamito suddenly held his breath.

"—Using that opportunity, liberate the «Elemental Lords» who are imprisoned by the otherworld's darkness."

"...!"

Everyone looked at one another.

"...C-Can that kind of thing be done?"

Rinslet asked.

"Impossible. That kind of thing—"

"After all, we're just students..."

"I will assist."

Iseria interrupted.

"Otherwise, the world will be swallowed by that darkness—"

"..."

"Meeting you all at that «Abandoned City» was perhaps not coincidence. I can only entrust this world's fate to you all—"

The «Water Elemental Lord» spoke with an extremely critical expression.

(Assassinating the elemental lords huh...)

Kamito recalled in his mind the memories from that day, three years ago.

(...Back then, I failed once.)

Lost Restia—

The will of «Ren Ashdoll» inside her had been contaminated.

Kamito looked over at each of the girls in turn in their shaken state.

"...Let us think about this for a bit first."

Finally, he spoke.

"No problem. But I hope you can give an answer before having an audience tomorrow."

The Water Elemental Lord's eyes gazed straight at Kamito.

Chapter 9 - The Last Night

Part 1

The sky was getting bright. Kamito's entourage returned to the castle at «Ragna Ys».

Entrusting Iseria with Rinslet for now, Kamito returned to his room.

There was a mountain of problems he had no choice but to think about.

Even so, Kamito could not resist the onslaught of drowsiness and fell on the bed, catching up on lost sleep.

It really had been quite a while since he was last able to sleep so deeply.

...Several hours later, Kamito finally woke up from his nap.

"Ah, mmm..."

"Huah..."

Every time he tossed and turned, he could hear cute sounds faintly.

(Hmm, a dream...?)

Still half asleep, Kamito cocked his head.

There seemed to be soft sensations on both of his arms.

(What is this? Feels so comfortable...)

Kamito absentmindedly grabbed what was in front of him.

Boing boing. Boing boing.

"...Mmm, Kami... to, that's..."

"...Stop... that, don't..."

As soon as he moved, a faint breath swept over his neck.

(...Wait, this is no dream!?)

Kamito suddenly opened his eyes—

"Oh dear, you're already getting up?"

Restia was looking at him mischievously.

"R-Restia!"

Kamito's face instantly felt hot.

She was dressed only in underwear, accompanying Kamito in bed.

"W-What, w-what are you doing!?"

"I am your contracted spirit, Kamito. Isn't sharing the same bed only natural?"

Murmuring, she pressed her modest but bouncy bosom against him.

Her black hair draped over her face. The shoulder clasp of her bra was undone, looking especially seductive.

"Okay, let's continue sleeping."

"H-Hey..."

She entwined her slender arm around Kamito's arm.

At this moment, his other arm was being tightly gripped.

"...Eh?"

"Kamito, please leave the darkness spirit."

Words like cold steel.

Shiny silver-white hair. Snow-white skin the color of fresh milk.

On the other side, the naked kneesocks sword spirit was also accompanying him in bed.

"E-Est...!"

"Kamito is my master."

Est hugged his arm tightly. Her petite and cute chest pressed against his arm.

"...Wah!"

"Oh dear, Miss Sacred Sword, you should be the one to leave Kamito instead, right?"

This time, Restia pulled Kamito to her side, squeezing his arm between her cleavage.

"...W-Wait!"

"Fufu, Kamito, your body is stiffening up."

"Kamito, with me as your sword, isn't that enough already?"

Sweet whispers were delivered to his ears from both sides. Their exhaled breaths swept across his neck.

(Th-This is a spirit sandwich...!)

This sentence surfaced in his mind.

"Over here, Kamito."

"Kamito, don't be tempted."

Boing. Boing boing.

"N-No, this cannot continue...!"

Suddenly.

"Kamito, the celebration is about to begin—"

The room's door opened.

"...!"

Making an appearance—

Were Claire and the young ladies, shocked the moment they opened the door.

"Y-You, y-you, what are you doing, Kamito?"

"To do something so shameless in the «Divine Ritual Institute»'s castle, how bold..."

"Th-The spirits are so sly!"

"...Kamito-kun, I cannot tolerate this."

Rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble rumble...!

"N-No, this is—

Embraced by two almost naked spirits in bed, Kamito tried to explain himself in vain.

Part 2

Evening. Having changed into a suit, Kamito was attending the victory celebration party held at the Grand Shrine.

Gathered in the spacious hall were nobles from the various countries, enthusiastically conversing about the «Blade Dance».

After the earlier incident, Est had went back to sleep in sword form. Kamito leaned her against a wall.

After all, carrying a sword was not appropriate for a banquet. But if he placed her there, at least he could keep her in sight throughout his time there.

Restia had disappeared off who knows where again. Oh well, given how willful she always behaved, she was probably going to suddenly return again.

"Team Scarlet's male elementalist..." "Reportedly defeated Ren Ashbell-sama—" "Although he's a bit scary, should we go greet him?" "N-No way, once you approach, you'll be enslaved by his demonic qualities." "But he's a bit handsome..."

The young noblewomen were chattering nonstop as they watched Kamito from afar.

The members of the winning team were the guests of honor. Being the center of attention could not be helped—

"L-Let's go, Kamito."

"Oh okay..."

Arm in arm with Kamito, Claire passed through the crowds.

Her slightly bulging chest was touching his arm, causing his heart to race.

Claire's formal dress was plain yet extremely beautiful.

It was a simple dress with a rose decorating the bodice. The pure white of its base color offered excellent contrast that brought out Claire's crimson hair and ruby eyes.

(...Damn she's really cute when she's not talking.)

Kamito blushed, turning his gaze away from the boldly open neckline.

The «Blade Dance» participants had all gathered to the center of the great hall.

There were a few familiar faces but «Team Inferno» was nowhere to be found.

Kamito was thinking he might be able to see Muir—

"Oh, isn't this Kamito?"

At this moment, greeting without reserve was—

"Ah, hi, Shao—"

It was Shao Fu of the «Four Gods». Despite being on opposing teams, their relations were enough to converse without reserve.

Shao was wearing a traditional Quina Empire outfit with a bold, high-slit design.

"You're still wearing combat clothing for a celebration?"

"This isn't combat clothing. It's formal attire."

Shao smiled wryly and shrugged.

"S-Sorry..."

"Oh well, it does resemble what I wear during blade dancing, so calling it combat clothing isn't wrong. However, the fabric is a bit different."

Saying that, Shao flipped her skirt hem to display her outstretched leg.

"...G-Girls should pay more attention in this area!"

Kamito frantically reminded her.

"Girls... To think that's the first time someone referred to me that way."

Shao muttered with her face all red in response.

Suddenly—

"Muu, Shao! Bring me some of that cake over there!"

From a distance, the voice of a slightly familiar imperial princess was heard.

"Oh, Linfa-sama is calling me. So, farewell, Kamito. Should you visit the Quina Empire in the future, come visit the residences of the Four Generals' families. You are definitely welcomed."

"Yeah."

The two shook hands to say farewell.

"...~!"

For some reason, Claire was glaring unhappily from beside him.

"...My, aren't you close with that Shao Fu?"

"Well, after all, she's a good opponent, worthy of respect."

"...Hmph."

Claire pouted with displeasure.

"Is that really all? Kazehaya Kamito—"

"...Huh?"

Kamito turned his head towards the voice—

Only to find a noble lady in a lovely dress standing behind him.

"Y-You're Leonora!?"

"Hmm, how rude. Is this attire really that ludicrous?"

"N-No it's not...!"

Kamito frantically shook his head.

"It's just that I'm used to the military uniform of the Dragon Knights. Uh, it's a bit surprising..."

If he really had to give his honest opinion, Leonora in a dress was so beautiful that he could not help but gasp.

A bodice decorated with ribbons. A violet one-piece dress revealing the shoulders, completely accentuating the curves of her excellent figure without reservation.

At this moment—

Kamito suddenly realized something.

"...Say, are you not wearing that currently?"

"W-Wait a sec, what kind of question is this!?"

Claire was completely stupefied.

"...No, given this rare occasion, I wore the underwear you picked."

Leonora blushed as she replied.

"The underwear I picked... Y-You mean the swimsuit?"

Probably, she meant the swimsuit she was wearing at the «Water Elemental Festival» before the final round.

Kamito remembered that it was a swimsuit that could be worn as underwear as well—

...Inexplicably, as soon as he became aware that she was wearing a swimsuit under the dress, he began to imagine all sorts of strange things.

"W-Why are you staring at my body! Pervert, what a pervert!"

Leonora glared at Kamito as if he were an insect.

"Y-You, y-you, even Leonora also..."

Rumble rumble rumble rumble... Claire's hair was standing up like flames.

"Hold on, don't jump to conclusions! I just wanted to thank you."

"...Thank?"

Leonora tilted her head in puzzlement.

"At the «Lost Cathedral», you helped out Ellis and Rinslet."

"That was only to return your favor. There is no need for thanks."

"Even so, it still was a great help. Thanks."

Kamito extended his hand—

Then Leonora shook it without hesitation.

Her expression relaxed.

"...How funny."

"Hmm?"

"Before encountering you, I never could have imagined I would shake a man's hand."

"I-I see..."

Her direct gaze caused his heart rate to rise.

"I look forward to a future blade dance with you again."

Saying that, Leonora turned her heel and left.

Seeing her majestic and gallant figure, Kamito could not help but stare mesmerized—

"Seriously, what are you gawking at? Let's go."

Hence, Claire resolutely dragged him away.

Part 3

Offerings to the «Elemental Lords» were enshrined in the depths of the great hall. An altar was set up there with the five «Queens» performing a solemn dance currently.

"A chance to see the «Queens»' dance performance is quite precious. Kamito, you should pay attention and watch carefully."

"Yeah. Reicha is very pretty too."

Dancing in front of the flames, Reicha looked completely different from when she was talking to Kamito's group.

Kamito exclaimed in earnest as he watched.

"...~T-To think you would ogle the Queens with such indecent eyes, what a pervert!"

"Y-You're the one who asked me to watch!"

"I didn't ask you to stare in obsession!"

He ended up causing Claire to sulk and pout.

At this moment.

"Onii-sama!"

Someone hugged Kamito from behind.

"M-Mireille..."

Hugging him was Mireille in a cute one-piece dress.

The Laurenfrost family's third daughter was gazing up at Kamito with lovely deep blue eyes.

"Onii-sama, you brought back Onee-sama's «Fenrir», right? Thank you!"

She hugged him tightly again.

"Nah, saving «Fenrir» was thanks to Rinslet's resolve."

Kamito smiled wryly and lightly caressed her platinum blonde hair.

Stroking, stroking.

"...Hua, Onii-sama is really..."

Mireille partially closed her eyes in comfort.

"O-Ooh~..."

Claire's displeased voice could be heard from beside him.

Next—

"Seriously, Mireille, so you ran over here."

Rinslet hurried over in her formal dress.

"Rinslet... So pretty."

Kamito could not help but exclaim.

Rinslet was wearing a blue dress with a mature design exposing the shoulders.

Her dazzling platinum blonde hair shone like bright starlight in the night sky.

"W-What are you talking about, Kamito-san!?"

Her face instantly turning bright red, Rinslet looked as though she was going to emit steam.

"Fufu, this is great, Onee-sama. And here was Onee-sama, talking about Onii-sama nonstop ever since she got back to the room this morning—Kyah!"

At this moment, maid Milla appeared without notice and pulled Mireille away from Kamito.

"So annoying, Milla is so stubborn. But I'll have you know that when Milla makes Onii-sama's bed, she sniffs the sheets... Mugugu."

"Mireille, you need some strict schooling."

"Mugugu... Muu~"

The muffled Mireille was dragged off to somewhere unknown.

"...Milla has become quite a capable maid."

Kamito nodded for a while, greatly impressed.

"Say, where's Carol?"

Then he realized that Rinslet's maid was missing.

"Carol stayed in the room. Together with Iseria-sama."

"...Really? Speaking of being with Carol, that feels worrying."

Kamito began to worry and mutter.

"...Ahhh, free at last."

At this moment, Fianna walked over with a haggard expression.

"Thank you for your hard work. Sorry to shove this troublesome task to you."

"Don't mind it. Just reward me with 'La Parfait' cookies."

"...Yeah, got it."

Claire shrugged.

Fianna had gone over to where the Ordesia Empire's nobles and VIPs were gathered in order to greet them as the team's representative.

This was supposed to be the job of the team leader, Claire, but there were many nobles who viewed her with disdain as the «Calamity Queen»'s sister. Hence, the imperial family's Fianna went in her stead.

The one tasked with this responsibility, Fianna was dressed in an extravagant dress sewn with silver threads.

She had a silver bracelet on her slender arm. On her head was a gemmed tiara.

"The way you look is really like a true princess."

"I am a true princess originally. Say, were you trying to praise me?"

Pressing a finger to her cheek, the princess inclined her head.

"...Hmm, K-Kamito, you are here."

This time, Ellis appeared.

She was wearing a black dress that boldly exposed her back.

Combined with her hair let down, she exuded even more mature airs than usual.

As soon as she met gazes with Kamito, Ellis turned her eyes away in embarrassment.

...Somehow, the way she acted felt a bit strange.

"Ellis, what's the matter?"

She looked down and fiddled with her fingers awkwardly.

(Ellis' grandfather... is Duke Fahrengart, right?)

He was the head of the Fahrengart family as well as being the Empire's premier military consultant.

An exalted noble who commanded the Ordesia Imperial Knights.

"Could it be that Duke Fahrengart was not satisfied with the victory?"

"U-Um, not that, but..."

Ellis stammered.

"Seeing your performance in the «Blade Dance», grandfather sees you as, uh, a s-suitor for a marriage contract..."

Her voice grew smaller and smaller... The last part was virtually inaudible.

"...Hmm?"

Kamito perked his ears in surprise.

—At this moment.

"...!?"

He felt a sharp pain from the seal on his left hand.

"Kamito, what's wrong?"

"...Sorry, I'm going outside for some air."

"Huh? W-Wait..."

"I'm coming back soon!"

Parting ways with Claire and the girls, Kamito slipped into the crowd and disappeared within the blink of an eye.

Part 4

As though guided by the pain on his left hand—

Kamito walked over to the terrace outside the Grand Shrine.

The cold air of the night brushed against his face softly.

There was no one on the terrace.

(...A barrier for driving people away huh.)

Guided by his left hand, he went directly to the terrace.

Suddenly, on the railing—

The black winged angel in the dress of darkness descended lightly.

"Sorry for calling you out in the middle of the celebration, Kamito."

"No, I was thinking of getting some fresh air actually."

Kamito leaned against the railing.

"Is it okay for you to appear in this kind of place?"

The «Sacred Spirit Knights» led by Luminaris were inside the Grand Shrine. Since they were targeting Restia, appearing here might be dangerous.

"No problem. The Holy Kingdom of Lugia cannot make their move in a densely crowded place like here."

"That's true."

"Also, should anything happen, you'll protect me, Kamito."

Restia got down from the railing and drew near Kamito's face.

Then—

"Kamito, have you reached a conclusion?"

"..."

What conclusion? —He did not ask this question.

"Very soon, you will be having an audience."

"...I know."

The answer was already decided.

Assuming Iseria Seaward's words were true—

Destruction would one day come to the world unless the «Elemental Lords» were liberated from that darkness.

However, it was true that he still could not dispel his confusion.

(...I am afraid.)

Afraid of losing something precious again.

(...I am not as strong as Rubia Elstein.)

He did not have the resolve to give up everything for the continent's future.

"...It's worrying. Will the «Demon King»'s power awaken again?"

The «Demon King»'s power was suppressed by the «Darkness Queen», Claire, for the time being.

But Rubia had said that the «Demon King»'s power had not vanished.

Tempted by «Ren Ashdoll»'s voice again, Kamito could end up losing his reason.

"—Don't worry. You have me here."

Restia placed her hand on top of Kamito's hesitating hand.

"Kamito, no matter what decision you make, I will stay with you, Kamito."

Her sorrowful dusk-colored eyes stared at Kamito.

"—So, you must make a decision you won't regret."

"...!"

Kissing him lightly on the cheek, she took off.

"...Farewell."

Leaving black feathers under the night sky, the darkness spirit flew away.

"...Restia."

The moon was obscured by clouds.

—The moment to make a decision was approaching.

Part 5

(...A decision I won't regret, huh.)

On the way back from the terrace—

"Kamito... Hey, Kamito."

"Hmm?"

He suddenly found his collar grabbed from behind.

"...Jeez, where did you go?"

It was Claire... Apparently, she came to search for him.

"Sorry..."

"You were talking with the darkness spirit, right?"

Saying that, she looked towards the terrace.

As expected of a «Queen»'s younger sister, her senses were rather sharp.

"Yeah, you're right."

"..."

After he admitted honestly, Claire pouted slightly.

"Hey, Kamito—"

Suddenly, she drew her face near.

"W-What...?"

Recalling the kiss just now, Kamito wavered to some extent.

"I don't have a partner. Let's dance?"

"You're pretty cute when you don't speak. I'm sure you could find a couple of partners—"

"There's no one I want to dance with, idiot. B-But... I-If it's you, I guess it's fine."

She glanced up as she murmured.

"...Then I'm really honored."

"O-Okay, lead the dance."

Claire held both of Kamito's hands and leaned her petite body close to him.

Kamito's heart was pounding uncontrollably. Due to his height, he was catching a top view of her slightly bulging chest beneath the dress.

"I don't know any proper dance steps."

Turning his gaze away, Kamito put one hand on her waist.

"Fine, I'll take the lead then."

"Okay..."

Claire took over the job of leading the dance without any fuss.

As expected of a daughter from a noble family. Her dance steps were quite flawless.

Through intimate skin contact, sensations of body warmth and a feminine body's suppleness were transmitted.

Kamito found it difficult not to feel conscious of it.

At this moment—

"Kamito, listen to me—"

Claire whispered by his ear.

"That matter... I have already committed to my decision."

"...Is that so?"

Kamito nodded lightly.

"Nee-sama intended to save the continent's future on her own. Although her method was wrong... I want to inherit Nee-sama's will."

"...If you fail, you lose your life."

"I know."

Claire nodded with a serious expression.

They stopped in a corner of the great hall.

"But it's already decided."

She released her hand lightly and turned her head.

Over there —

Was the trio of Fianna, Ellis and Rinslet.

Everyone nodded with an expression of resolve.

"Everyone..."

"—Let's liberate the «Elemental Lords» and save the continent."



Claire declared without hesitating.

(...Yeah. My teammates. This is the way it is.)

Kamito smiled wryly.

Serious, prideful, magnificent, very dazzling.

They were quite attractive—girls.

He could not help but feel proud of having fought together alongside them in the «Blade Dance».

Facing them, Kamito—

"Yeah."

He made a slight nod.

—His decision was made.

Epilogue

Part 1

—This was fine.

The girl murmured to herself.

...While flying through the dark night.

...While recalling the final sensation on her lips as she parted with him just now.

—This was fine... With this, I can finish my mission.

The tears falling on her cheeks scattered in the wind.

Inside her heart, she was about to awaken.

The «Darkness Elemental Lord»—Ren Ashdoll.

Her will, corrupted by the otherworldly darkness, was surely going to turn him into the «Demon King».

If that were to pass, then all hope would be lost.

The «Elemental Lords» would be devoured by the otherworldly darkness completely, thereby bringing about the end of the world.

—That absolutely cannot be allowed to happen.

If he and the world where he lived were to be protected—

Part 2

Before dawn while the moon was still about—

Kamito's team was summoned to the ritual for gaining an audience.

After performing a ritual purification thoroughly, everyone changed into brand new uniforms.

The Academy's uniform was a simplified version of spirit attire. As ritual attire, its class was not particularly high, but wearing the combat outfits used in the «Blade Dance» in the meeting ritual had already become customary.

Led by the five «Queens», Kamito's group arrived before the door in the Grand Shrine's depths.

Connected to the alternate dimension—the door of the «Endless Corridor».

Probably nervous, none of them spoke.

(...That door is exactly the same as what I remember from three years ago.)

Kamito muttered to himself mentally.

"—Please pass through this door and walk forward. However, do not take any detours off the path and do not turn back. Otherwise, you will end up wandering the «Endless Corridor» forever."

After nodding to the «Queens», Kamito's group stepped through the door.

—The corridor stretched endlessly.

Walking nonstop along this «Endless Corridor» that confused one's sense of distance...

They arrived before the gates of the throne room.

Kamito halted in his steps.

"It's already okay now."

"Yes, this is an isolated alternate dimension. No one can eavesdrop."

Fianna nodded and agreed.

Liberating the «Elemental Lords» from the otherworldly darkness that was beyond this world.

However, things were not that simple.

Rubia Elstein had planned to use the «Demon King»'s power to destroy the «Elemental Lords» together with the darkness.

However, once the «Elemental Lords» were destroyed, «Astral Zero» and even the human realm were going to suffer a devastating blow.

That sort of method could not be accepted no matter what.

Furthermore, if Kamito relied on the «Demon King»'s power—

(...The contaminated her was going to summon that darkness to the world, right?)

Hence, it was necessary to liberate the «Elemental Lords» without using the «Demon King»'s power.

The key lay in the Water Elemental Lord's manifested avatar, Iseria Seaward.

Whether she was able to awaken the «Elemental Lords»' remaining sanity—

Shall determine their success.

A risky plan as though walking on thin ice.

Upon failure, more lives were going to be lost in addition to Kamito's.

"Final check. Is it really okay?"

"—Don't make me repeat myself, Kamito."

Claire shook her head and asserted firmly.

"Knights do not go back on a made decision."

"My decision is already made."

"I also believe in you, Kamito-kun."

Ellis, Rinslet and Fianna all nodded respectively.

—I am your sword, your will is my command.

—Kamito, our fates are as one.

Held in his hands, the dual swords replied.

"Got it. Let's go—"

With a forceful nod, Kamito opened the gate to the throne room.

Part 3

The giant staircase appeared before Kamito's group.

The thrones at the top were surrounded by dazzling light and impossible to see.

Kamito gripped the «Demon Slayer».

Freeing all the «Elemental Lords» would not be realistic.

(—The target is the «Fire Elemental Lord», Volcanicus.)

Despite being in a state of suspended activity currently, he was actually the «Elemental Lord» who was corrupted the most by the darkness.

Should his madness flare up again, Volcanicus would most likely demand Claire as a sacrifice again.

Led by Kamito, «Team Scarlet» climbed the great staircase step by step.

Invisible blades concealed in their hearts.

At the altar midway along the stairs, Kamito's group knelt down.

—Quite an outstanding blade dance from you all.

The «Elemental Lords»' voices were heard overhead.

—We shall bestow an otherworldly miracle to reward your most excellent offerings.

—What do you desire?

"We—"

Kamito slowly looked up.

Then he repeated the same «Wish» from three years ago.

"—We wish for the death of the «Elemental Lords»."

In that instant...

Darkness surged out from the bright light at the thrones.

Unlike the comforting darkness of night—

This was an otherworldly darkness that was not supposed to exist in this world.

"That is the elemental lords' «Wish»—!"

Claire's terrified moan leaked out of her throat.

A large amount of darkness flowed out from the thrones, slowly immersing the stairs like flowing blood.

"—It's begun. The «Elemental Lords»' assassination!"

Yelling at the same time, Kamito formed elemental waffen in his hands and climbed the massive staircase all at once.

During the few seconds when the «Elemental Lords»' miracle was correcting the paradox of their own deaths...

They had to seize this chance to end everything—!

"Come on out, the beast of the freezing fangs of ice—«Fenrir»!"

Behind him, Rinslet summoned Fenrir.

The giant white wolf leapt using the tenacious leg strength, reaching Kamito's side.

ROOAAR!

Fenrir howled. Its wide open jaws released ice and snow.

No. What came out was not only a blizzard.

"«Elemental Lords»! If your minds still remain, listen to my voice—!"

The howling blizzard blew and scattered that hair, the color of shimmering water—

Appearing out from Fenrir's mouth, Iseria Seaward yelled.

"Do it now... While I... summon their consciousness...!"

The darkness spilling out stopped for an instant.

Was it because Iseria's voice reached the sliver of rationality remaining in the «Elemental Lords»—?

"Ohhhhhhhh!"

The «Demon Slayer» and the «Vorpal Sword».

Wielding the dual swords of light and darkness, Kamito took a leap.

The thrones were covered by the horrendous otherworldly darkness.

A burning flame was there. Kamito definitely saw it.

Sweeping away the surging darkness, he ran in one breath.

"—Wake up, «Fire Elemental Lord»."

Shining with silver-white brilliance, the «Demon Slayer» sliced through the darkness occupying the throne.

The sacred sword's blade, pierced the fire burning in the darkness—

—O child of darkness—

"...!?"

Just at this moment, the voice came.

Tempting Kamito to awaken as the «Demon King», her voice.

(...How could this... be possible...!?)

Kamito was dumbfounded.

"...!"

Against his will, his body froze in posture with the «Demon Slayer» still extended.

Unable to move. It was as though the words sounding in his head were binding him.

The silver-white blade for freeing the «Elemental Lord» still had not reached its target.

Time stopped.

—O «Demon King»... Go on and release the true darkness—

"...A-Ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

In the next instant, Kamito's consciousness was swallowed by the otherworldly darkness.

Part 4

(...This place... is...?)

Kamito was continuously sinking in bottomless darkness.

Eternal darkness without any boundaries.

Even the «Demon Slayer»'s brightness had instantly disappeared.

(...Is this inside my consciousness? Or perhaps—)

His body was falling without end. Impossible to resist.

(Where, am I going—)

Even that kind of question was disappearing like smoke.

His mind was being eroded. Even thought was about to be abandoned.

Before that, in the depths of the darkness—

Kamito saw that.

(What... That's...)

His entire body trembled in fear.

Inside this darkness that was not supposed to exist in this world, something was restless.

Neither spirit nor human.

Those were countless—

(...Angels?)

That name suddenly appeared in his mind.

A fairy tale existence that did not exist in this world.

It—

An army of thousands, tens of thousands, preparing to climb out of the darkness.

(That's the true form of the despair that Rubia saw...)

The worst prediction flashed through his mind.

(...If those things entered «Astral Zero»—)

The world was going to end.

At this moment—

"—Don't worry, Kamito."

He heard a voice.

(...?)

This was not the voice of the contaminated «Ren Ashdoll».

The owner of the voice was smiling in front of Kamito's eyes.

"Res... tia...?"

The demon sword he was gripping in his left hand and disappeared without him noticing.

She spread both arms—

And embraced Kamito who had been falling nonstop.

Part 5

The infinite darkness devouring Kamito disappeared.

As he regained his senses—

Kamito found himself standing before the «Elemental Lords»' thrones.

Before his eyes was Restia's face, smiling as though in a dream.

Her lovely lips were trembling lightly.

"Miss Sacred Sword. I apologize. For pushing this mission on you."

"...!"

The «Demon Slayer» was giving off dazzling brilliance.

Its cold blade—

Had pierced Restia's chest directly.

"...Restia?"

Kamito stared wide-eyed and muttered hoarsely.

"...W... HY..."

"It's very... simple, Kamito..."

Breathing extremely feebly, Restia shook her head.

"Once «Ren Ashdoll»'s will is destroyed, you will no longer become the «Demon King». Hence, I hoped to be killed the instant her will took over me."

"Why... would..."

From the very start—

From the very start, she had already decided to do this, right?

By her own efforts alone. Personally sending «Ren Ashdoll»'s will to the grave.

Fingers trembling, she released the hilt of the sword stabbed inside her body.



"—A final farewell, Kamito."

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Miss Sacred Sword, please protect... Kamito well..."

"Restia... RESTIAAAAAAAA!"

At the same moment when the «Demon Slayer» lost its brightness...

The figure of the darkness spirit girl vanished.

—END.

Afterword

—No matter what decision you make, I will stay with you.

Thank you very much to everyone who is holding this book in their hands. I hereby present to you, the eleventh installment of *Seirei Tsukai no Blade Dance*, Elemental Lord Assassination!

Okay, after persisting for so long, the 'Blade Dance festival arc' finally draws to a close in this volume. However, because this is just the end of the second arc, (there are still tons of mysteries and unresolved foreshadowing), the main story will continue to keep coming!

Next are the acknowledgements. To Sakurahanpen-sensei who has again drawn the cover and illustrations beautifully, many thanks. A Claire with a radiant expression is very adorable.

To Hyoujou Issei-sensei who is producing the super high quality manga version, I see that Est finally makes her appearance in the story. As a reader, I look forward to reading it every month.

Narita-san, the editor in charge, thank you for taking care of me this time as well.

Of course, my greatest thanks go to everyone of you, the readers!

Next, let's talk about my recent news as the author. In February, there was an opportunity for me to visit Taiwan for an autograph session. The passion of Taiwan fans are no less than those in Japan, so amazing. Everyone was very friendly and the food was great. What a wonderful experience. If another chance comes along, I really want to visit again.

On the work side, I am participating as a player in the TRPG replay of Fujimi Shobo x MediaFactory joint venture 'GranCrest.' The MF Bunko J side had Hirasakayomi-sensei, Sagarasou-sensei, Suzuri-sensei as well as Shimizu participating. It feels like it's going to be a very interesting replay. I'm so looking forward to it.

Finally, we have the customary popularity contest results (up to Volume 10). The first and second place are dominated by overwhelming votes for the spirit combo, Est and Restia. 3rd place is Kamito, 4th is Leonora, 5th is Claire, 6th is Fianna, 7th is Rinslet, 8th is Ellis, 9th is Rubia, 10th is Scarlet. As usual, 5th to 8th place was a huge free-for-all with very small

differences. I will treasure the survey comments so please continue to send them in.

—So, the next volume is the beginning of the 3rd arc: 'Spirit War.' When I first started the series, I planned to end things with the third arc so it's quite gratifying to finally reach this stage. Using "more love, more comedy, battles above all!" as the goal, I've charged forward to this point. Here on, I hope to continue receiving everyone's support!

Shimizu Yuu, June 2013

Illustrator's Afterword

Scarlet: "With less to cover up, my job is easier, meow—"

Hello and hello again. I am Sakurahanpen! This time's cover is a radiantly smiling Claire-san!

Why does it feel so much like the final volume...!? You're smiling too happily, Claire-san! (says the guy who drew her)

On the other hand, when drawing her, I was thinking worriedly, will there be a problem with Claire-san like this!? I wanted to make her cuter, but felt worried about it(‘ω｀)

Oh dear, I never thought the volume would end like that. It feels like Kamito-kun is so pitiful! Do your best, Kamito... Also, Rubia-san is so cool. So firmly resolved, super cool...!

I'm so curious about Volume 12! I really want to see what happens next... Looking forward to it, Shimizu-sensei...!

So, see you next volume!

あとがき

■初めて、またはお久しぶりです桜はんぺんです！
今回の表紙はにこやかクレアさんです！

なんという最終巻臭…！ほがらかすぎるよクレアさん！
(描いたのは自分ですが)

逆にクレアさんこれで大丈夫かなーと不安になりながら描いてました！
可愛くは描けたと思うんですが不安(／ω＼)

いやー最後の最後でまさかの展開です。
カミトくんが不憫になってきたよ！頑張るのじゃカミトよ…。
後、ルビアさんがカッコイイですねー。なんというかブレなくて
凄くカッコいいです…！

12巻がきになります！次が早く読みたい…。
志瑞先生楽しみにしてます…！

それではまた次巻で～！

お世話になりました!!
志瑞先生、成田さん
ミニキャラ: うめだ夏乃ちゃん
トートルさん
お!!やべとうござります!



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